

About the Venice Biennale
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By Marcia E. Vetrocq

There have been three occasions in the history of the Venice Biennale when the nature of American cultural influence has emerged as a central issue. The first was in 1964, when Robert Rauschenberg took home the Biennale prize for painting, a recognition tantamount to Europe's official concession that the art world's center of gravity had shifted from Paris to New York. The second was 1990, when Jenny Holzer's sumptuous installation of marble inlay and LED signs in the U.S. pavilion prompted widespread grousing that the Americans, who bagged that year's Golden Lion for the best national presentation, had bought their way to Biennale hegemony. The third occasion is now, with the 52nd edition of the venerable institution having been entrusted to its first American-born visual-arts director, Robert Storr. To be sure, just one of the Biennale's three components bears the director's imprint outright: the international group show, which is divided between the "Italy" pavilion in the municipal garden, or Giardini, and the cavernous former naval facility called the Arsenale, which lies between the Giardini at the city's eastern end and Piazza San Marco. (The Italy pavilion is not to be confused with Italy's own national presentation, called the "Italian" pavilion, which appears in the Arsenale.) The Biennale's defining feature remains the tradition of showcasing national presentations. This year, the number of countries sponsoring exhibitions reached a record 76, with the 31 original pavilions erected in the Giardini representing a minority stake for the first time. Four more have been accommodated within the Arsenale, while the rest are distributed in palazzi, warehouses and other structures throughout the city. The Biennale's third component is the menu of affiliated or "collateral" exhibitions, which this year likewise posts a new high of 34 shows, large and small. Mirroring that expansion, however, the visual-arts director's exhibition has grown in size and notoriety over the last 15 years, becoming an international curatorial plum and assuming a cardinal role in determining the

tone of the Biennale overall. And this year? Storr's show has been judiciously selected and impeccably installed. It is star-studded but not overly trendy, being inclined to favor senior and A-list artists. It boasts a sizable field of painters, in contrast to the rest of the Biennale. The international exhibition is conscientious, considered, and--with a few ravishing exceptions--resolutely unremarkable. If the Rauschenberg coup represented the ascendance of America's irreverent and inclusive '60s spirit, and the Holzer brouhaha reflected widespread resentment of the overweening financial clout of the United States in the early '90s, then Storr--with his show's uniform polish and abundance of big shots, its avoidance of the unscripted and potentially messy--stands open to the objection that he has imposed the cold and businesslike standards of an American museum onto the once freewheeling culture of the Biennale, with its tolerance of the ephemeral and improvisational. Add to this the observation that more than a third of the artists in his exhibition are American or live for much of the year in New York, the fact that many of the international artists exhibit in its leading galleries, and the matter of Storr's having rubber-stamped a decision to allocate the pavilion of Africa to the private collection of a controversial businessman, and then for good measure throw in the fact that the U.S. pavilion houses a bland, Guggenheim-curated tribute to the long-departed Felix Gonzalez-Torres, and you can readily get a picture of American curatorial leadership as chary of risk-taking and prone to ignoring the big picture while regarding "culture" as the summary of individual acts of self-expression and patronage. Before anyone accuses Storr of having unilaterally imposed U.S. values on Venice, it's important to remember that the character, if not the itemized content, of the current Biennale was essentially foretold three years ago. Indeed, Storr has delivered the authoritative and disciplined exhibition mandated in 2004 by Davide Croft, the president of the Biennale's administrative board [see "Front Page," Oct. '04]. In August 2004, when Croft appointed the visual-arts directors for the following year (Maria de Corral and Rosa Martinez), he also took the unprecedented step of announcing their successor for 2007. Storr thus became the beneficiary of the longest lead time ever granted to an organizer of the Venice show. Storr is not only the first American curator to be

handed the reins of the Biennale: he is the first in nearly two decades who does not fit the profile of the independent international curator, that intrepid impresario with loose or multiple museum affiliations who ranges far and wide, alone and on teams, ready to discover nascent stars and baptize new trends. By contrast, Storr is a professor (at NYU in 2004 when he was appointed by Croft, currently the dean of Yale's School of Art) and a curator who spent 13 years, the lion's share of his career, at New York's Museum of Modern Art, where exhibitions generally serve to fix the flux of contemporary art in the golden amber of institutional affirmation. Though no stranger to group shows, Storr has tended to direct his efforts toward diligently researched monographic exhibitions rather than toward assembling epoch-defining or prodigy-launching group shows aimed at roiling the waters of public or critical opinion. In 2004, Croft set out to make over the Biennale, to replace the exhausting polemical flamboyance and edge-worshipping excess of Francesco Bonami's 2003 exhibition with a dignified show born of focus, probity and conviction. He found his man in Storr. Early on, Storr declared that he would depart from recent precedent by refusing to freight the art works chosen for 2007 with an all-inclusive sociological or political message. Accordingly, the exhibition title proclaims no unifying theory about the zeitgeist and, instead, delivers a New Age prescription to the viewer: "Think with the Senses--Feel with the Mind. Art in the Present Tense." I'm not convinced that this title sounds better in Italian, as some have claimed, but the language shift does disclose one interesting point. Unlike the English, the Italian verb form used in "Pensa con i Sensi--Senti con la Mente. L'Arte al Presente" specifically directs the advice to the singular "you." Ultimately, it is a quiet and private experience of viewership to which Storr's exhibition appeals, a premise that rests on an image of the artist as an exceptionally sensitive form-giver. After offering a perfunctory summary in his catalogue essay of the complex historical forces that led to the Biennale's genesis, Storr dismisses all of that as so much baggage, asserting that the exhibition ultimately can "serve" the public and art only because "the unique viewer and the unique object can come in contact." He admits that it is "counterintuitive" to ask a large international show, with an unpredictable audience drawn from

near and far, to be an occasion for such intimacy. It may be counterproductive as well. The Main Show, Up Close The international group show comprises 97 artists and teams, with more than half of that number in the Arsenale and the remainder--with the demographic skewing older, more famous and/or deceased--in the Italy pavilion. The roster includes a hefty contingent of veterans (Giovanni Anselmo, Gabriele Basilico, Louise Bourgeois, Daniel Buren, Waltercio Caldas, Valie Export, Leon Ferrari, Ellsworth Kelly, Ilya and Emilia Kabakov, Elizabeth Murray, Bruce Nauman, Sigmar Polke, Gerhard Richter, Susan Rothenberg, Robert Ryman, Nancy Spero, Lawrence Weiner, Franz West). An appreciable portion of the midcareer artists are nearly as familiar on the international scene, with Francis Alys, Sophie Calle, Jenny Holzer, Pierre Huyghe, Guillermo Kuitca, Steve McQueen, Philippe Parreno, Raymond Pettibon and Nedko Solakov among those on hand. The show acquires a pronounced memorial atmosphere with an ensemble of works by Chen Zhen, Felix Gonzales-Torres, Martin Kippenberger, Leonilson, Fred Sandback and Philippe Thomas in the upstairs gallery of the Italy pavilion, a Sol LeWitt wall drawing on the pavilion's main level and an installation by Jason Rhoades in the Arsenale. The early reviews of the exhibition in the American and Italian press often took as their point of departure the question of whether the selection was predictable, bland, boring. (Even the postponement to October of the announcement of all the award recipients except for Malik Sidibe, who received the Golden Lion for Lifetime Achievement, seemed designed to ensure a subdued opening.) I think a more apt term is the one I overheard pronounced by several underwhelmed Italian viewers: trappo museale. The show is indeed "too museum-like," and not merely for the blue-chip market ranking and textbook-worthiness of many of the participants. More than just boasting a comparatively svelte form (Bonami's roundup of 380 artists in 2003 remains seared in memory), the current Biennale has become very, very tidy. The outdoor interventions on the grounds of the Giardini are only two in number, a cheery little gazebo by Buren and a sprawling cinderblock model of a favela created by the young Brazilian collective Morrinho Project. No monumental sculpture punctuated the waterfront view, where pieces by Fabrizio Plessi and Sislej Xhafa have

towered in the past, and no performers or installations were permitted to clutter the allee that leads from the gate to the pavilions. The reign of fastidiousness extends inside the Italy pavilion, where morns have been assigned to artists on a single-occupancy basis. Even more startling, though, is the progressive gentrification of the Arsenale. The dramatic raw spaces toward the rear, which were initially opened to art during Harald Szeemann's first turn as director in 1999 (and which housed, unforgettably, Chen's array of 100 drums, Serge Spitzer's dazzling installation of glasses and Cai Guo-Qiang's re-creation of the Rent Collection Courtyard) have been rehabbed and sublet to national pavilions. The evocative area that opens to a boat slip, where Pipilotti Rist's bubble machine and Not Vital's caravan of camel heads greeted visitors in the past, is utterly vacant. And the Corderie, the long vaulted main hall of the Arsenale, has been cleanly configured, left and right, like a giant ice cube tray, with each artist's contribution chilling in a politely observed zone. We must all bite our tongues, we who complained about crowding and overflow in years past. Further contributing to the mannerly impression are the preponderance in both venues of fiat objects (paintings, photographs, projection screens, documentary materials) and the preference for spatially restrained three-dimensional work. One partial exception is the Arsenale's opening installation by Luca Buvoli, which takes its cues from the formal dynamism and typographic inventiveness of Italian Futurism. The artist offers a meditation on bellicose patriotism in general and the delusional optimism of Marinetti's utopian dream in particular. The angular mise-en-scene of jagged planes and tipsy letters is eye-catching, but the foyer role imposed on the installation frustrates a full appreciation of Buvoli's finely edited animation and taped interviews. By contrast, a bit more elbow room might have served the hemmed-in components of West's *The Fragile on its Cloak* (2007). The Austrian artist's roughly painted abstract forms in papier-mache and lacquered aluminum floor pieces, which resemble a misshapen pastry, baguette and turd, are congregated too tightly for their comic abjection to be appreciated. Some space-chewing posthumous misbehavior is permitted to erupt midway down the Corderie with Rhoades's *Tijuanatanjerchandelier* (2006), which was added to the program after the

41-year-old artist's death in August 2006. Installed by his studio assistants, the free-for-all of mattresses, serapes, cheap souvenirs and neon letters spelling out slang terms for female genitalia inevitably has ceded some shock value to an archival air, but the work's rudeness remains tonic. As for sculpture in the Italy pavilion, where painting is king, Anselmo's too-neatly contained heap of earth with diorite blocks and compass needles feels as confined as West's objects. The effect of Spero's *Maypole/ Take No Prisoners* (2007) is undermined by the work's placement just within the entrance, where visitors hurry past. Revisiting the sardonically festive form she used 40 years ago to protest the Vietnam war, Spero has erected a roughly 10-foot pole, from whose sprouting ribbons and chains dangle cutouts of severed heads, the victims of today's atrocities. More happily installed is Nauman's *Venice Fountains* (2007), two working assemblages that confront each other from the long sides of an oblong room. Streams of water issue from the mouths of masks, concave casts of a face (not the artist's), and tumble noisily into the deep basins of studio sinks. The contraptions reference everything from Roman waterworks to the artist's own early body casts and his legendary spitting performance, *Self-Portrait as Fountain* (1966). If the piece feels a touch too literal, it is redeemed by a wry coals-to-Newcastle effect, since, historically speaking, the city on canals has shown scant interest in the fountain as an urban ornament. The taming of the three-dimensional extends to the more conceptually ambitious mixed-medium installations, which are packaged neatly in the Arsenale's bays and vitrines and tend to hug the walls. With texts, drawings, a video and an inoperative (we are reassured) weapon, Solakov's *Discussion (Property)*, 2007, investigates the Russian-Bulgarian dispute over the right to manufacture AK-47, or Kalashnikov, assault rifles. Along the way, Solakov brings up the matter of the Cyrillic alphabet (whose letters are said to have been purloined from a pair of Bulgarian brothers) and the *Lactobacilins Bulgaricus* bacterium (the microscopic source of Russia's best yogurt), all to weave a rambling satirical yarn about the international arms trade, global branding, intellectual property and lingering resentments within the former Soviet bloc. Solakov's project finds a post-Cold War pendant in Dimitri Gutov's *The Declination of Atoms from the Straight Line* (2007), an

installation with an audio track (credited to the British art critic David Riff) and 20 paintings, courtesy of the Karl Marx School of the English Language. The latter, a text explains, is a group that gathers regularly in the artist's Moscow studio to read Marx aloud in English and to compare that translation to the German and Russian versions. The account conjures a quaintly literary and idealistic study group. With their stilted quotes and occasional portrait or image, the clutch of oddball canvases acknowledge the importance of typography in avant-garde design while conveying the impossibility of complete communication across languages. Also impressive are two ongoing documentation projects that engage different materials to fulfill solemn missions of remembrance. Californian Emily Prince produces palm-size pencil drawings of the U.S. war dead in Afghanistan and Iraq (3,800 when the catalogue was printed), replicating photographs posted online by the bereaved families and inscribing each vellum sheet with information about the victim. In the Corderie, Prince provided a vitrine with the archival boxes that house the drawings alphabetically. Nearby, she pinned several hundred of the portraits to the wall to form a map of the U.S., its misshapen contour a result of clustering the images around the victims' respective home states. In *Material for a Film*, Emily Jacir, who lives in New York and Ramallah, is concerned with a single victim, Wael Zuaiter, a Palestinian intellectual and activist assassinated in Rome by Israeli agents in 1972 in retribution for the attack on Israel's athletes in Munich. To excavate an individual life, one associated with the cause of Palestinian rights well before the surge of Islamic fundamentalism and militant extremism, Jacir assembles letters and photographs, interviews with Zuaiter's friends and associates, archival oddities (including the briefest clip from the 1963 film *The Pink Panther*, in which he had a walk-on as a green-jacketed waiter) and Zuaiter's copy of *A Thousand and One Nights*, which he intended to translate from Arabic into Italian, and which took one of the bullets in the volley that killed him. The most capacious of spaces in the Arsenale and the Italy pavilion, which typically have been devoted in past biennali to sculptures and installations, are both given over to wall-hung works. This may be an expression of Storr's painting partisanship, but it makes for two knockout rooms. In the Arsenale,

El Anatsui's towering, tapestrylike assemblages (both 2007) of folded metal and bottle caps "stitched" together with twists of copper wire are draped at the ends of the vast hall. Arranged in rows along the long walls are 38 tondi (1994-2000 and 2000-05), each about 47 inches in diameter, from Guillelmo Kultca's ongoing series of "Diarios" paintings. It's essentially an album of polished studio pensieri. We find the painter limbering up and working out, employing anything from gestural play and Op art patterns to allusions to Miro, Klee or one of his own trademark ground plans. The suggestive encounter between Anatsui and Kultca--which makes the most of the obvious differences in medium and scale while finding common ground in terms of surface richness, rhythmic patterning and pleasure in the patiently handmade--makes you wish Storr had been less doctrinaire about keeping his artists apart. In the enormous square gallery at the heart of the Italy pavilion, Polke is represented by seven large works (2005 and 2007), at once stately and wry, rendered in violet pigments and mixed mediums on fabric. The figurative imagery rendered here and there on the dark fields includes disarmingly breezy citations of past graphic styles, but in a certain light, the monumental works take on the glowering aspect of weather-darkened metal. The sheer boldness of the paintings stands out amid the routine offerings of such fellow Olympians as Richter and Ryman. Also more than deserving of its distinctive octagonal room is Splitting the Other (2007), a 14-panel work, organized in diptychs and triptychs, by Nalini Malani. The Mumbai-based painter serves up her own Polke-ish cocktail of Eastern and Western references, with imagery drawn from the mythic past and the consumption-driven present, all deployed on a sun-bright and gravity-free ground in formations that suggest anything from embryology to cosmology. Through a Lens: Video and Photo in the Main Show The orderly unspooling of work down the Corderie has left the central aisle mostly unencumbered, but for the cubic forms of five freestanding viewing rooms created for Yang Fudong's video, Seven Intellectuals in Bamboo Forest, the fourth and fifth installments of which are debuting in Venice. The episodic black-and-white cycle, with its beautiful young idealists, is less la vie de boheme than Watteau's Cythera, all longing and loss and wise resolve. Storr's decision to physically separate the

five chapters is a delightful conceit that treats each viewer as another pilgrim seeking the truth from room to room amid the Corderie's forest of brick columns. On balance, Storr rarely falters in his choice of time-based work. Among the standouts in the Arsenale is Bouncing Skull (2007) by Rome- and New York-based Paolo Canevari. The 12-minute loop shows a determined athlete--we never see above his shoulders--capably maneuvering a human skull through a series of soccer moves against the backdrop of the Serbian army's bombed-out headquarters in Belgrade. The visuals are macabre enough, but their power is compounded by the audio track, which sickeningly amplifies the scuffling and thud of every scoop and kick. Belgium's Sophie Whettnall also isolates the look and sound of violence in Shadow Boxing (2004), a three-minute-long test of nerves in which a young woman stands stock-still and unflinching while a brawny boxer strikes vehemently at the air in alarming proximity to her face. His hands fly like hummingbirds, her hair moves in response, and, in the end, you can't be sure if their encounter is about aggression and resistance or trust. In the Italy pavilion, the accomplished videos are led by the mural-size dolefullhouse (2007), a six-minute animation in the softened jewel colors of high-end children's books that was created by the Japanese artist Tabaimo. Two human forearms, beset by an addict's itch and interrupted by a puppyish octopus, are seen systematically arranging the furnishings of a dollhouse, only to have floodwaters rush through and force a Sisyphean repetition of the effort. Kara Walker's elegant new installation combines projections, puppetry, photographs and drawings in another enactment, familiar perhaps but nonetheless moving, of racial exploitation and hardship. Historical rumination is also the starting point for Joshua Mosley's black-and-white animation dread (2007), which is accompanied by five small bronze sculptures of the work's principals. The Philadelphia-based Mosley has clay-and-resin figures of Pascal and Rousseau debate the engagement of God in human affairs within a digitally photographed and manipulated landscape setting. As the exemplars of 17th- and 18th-century philosophy trade aphorisms, brute nature erupts in the form of a man-eating dog, and God comes to seem increasingly remote. If there is no God, there is plenty of grace in Shaun

Gladwell's sublime Storm Sequence (2000), the story of a man and his skateboard. A land-bound sufferer at the Australian coast on a stormy day, the ace delicately lifts his baggy trouser legs to mount his board and proceeds to execute a series of turns and tricks so fluid, so assured as to bring to mind the most transporting moments of Fred Astaire. Photographs are largely confined to the Arsenale, where they are numerically prominent but conceptually restricted. Storr's take on the medium is pretty much embodied by the work of the 72-year-old Malian artist Malik Sidibe. On view is Sidibe's second series of photographs for the project L'Afrique chant contre le SIDA, which shows the finalists of a music contest founded in Mali to raise AIDS awareness. Photography in Storr's show is technically conservative and subject-driven. In many instances (Elaine Tedesco's typology of guard houses that protect Brazilian residential communities, Rosemary Laing's views of a former detention center for illegal immigrants in the Australian desert, Tomoko Yoneda's innocent-looking shots of such trouble spots as the North-South Korea border and Sarajevo) the pictures are also overly dependent on label information for their impact. The line-up of photography in the Arsenale amounts to a sweeping inventory of the pressing, tragic and seemingly insoluble problems of the world. From Milan's Gabriel Basllico come harrowing pictures, shot in 1991, of a bombed-out Beirut. Pavel Wolberg (born in Leningrad, based in Tel Aviv) documented people and events in Palestinian refugee camps and the occupied territories between 2002 and 2005. There are six prints from "Hospital Party," a 2006 series by Tomer Ganihar (born in Tel Aviv, based in New York) that show wounded and maimed dolls. They seem too indebted to Cindy Sherman's staged grotesques until you learn that the mannequins, child-and adult-size, are used in Israel to train emergency medical personnel. Full-dress theater does come to the fore, however, in the "Living History" series (2002-04) by Britain's Neil Hamon, who presents the now-overworked subject of those devoted hobbyists who participate in reenactments of past wars. Rosario Lopez photographs a desolate and trash-littered beach in Peru, also bringing to the Arsenale a little structure of woven reeds that replicates the worker shelters seen from afar in the pictures. Yto Barrada takes us to Tangier with photos

and texts that address the sprucing up of the city's public parkland and the attendant dire consequences for its homeless population and native wildflowers. Paula Trope, too, has her eye on a city, Rio de Janeiro, where she has worked with Morrinho Project, an anti-violence club founded in 1998 by boys who are now the artists behind the cinderblock favela installation in the Giardini. The "No Sympathy" series (2004-05) includes Trope's frank and casual pictures of Morrinho members plus their blurrily vignettted photographs, shot with pinhole cameras, of the original favela model in Rio, a miniature environment fabricated via the same scavenging and improvisation that sustains their actual homes and community. Behind the Garden Gate This year, all roads in the Giardini lead to Russia, whose spacious pavilion houses a high-energy group show called "Click I Hope," a rather disingenuously upbeat title that takes its name from the slightest of the entries, Julia Milner's Web-based piece (www.clickIhope.com). With a mouse click, you can endorse this sentiment, which also crawls across the pavilion in a 50-language LED ribbon. Inside, "hope" is an altogether more elusive state. The collective AES+F (Tatiana Arzamasova, Lev Evzovich, Evgeny Svyatsky, Vladimir Fridkes) is projecting The Last Riot, an inconclusive, three-channel Gotterdammerung that blends animation with 3-D modeling and stars squads of perfect youths resembling Abercrombie & Fitch models on call for an Apocalypse Chic-themed shoot in an alpine landscape. For nearly 20 minutes, the beautiful kids engage in a bloodless combat that seems to pantomime the compositions of old master paintings and manages to be alternately stirring, horrifying and enervating. With disaster seemingly imminent for the planes, oil rigs, carousels and other toys of civilization that drift into view, AES+F posit the "end" as a condition without end. It might have been the superb quality of the piece, or the need for catharsis, but The Last Riot elicited the only prolonged round of applause I've ever witnessed at the Biennale. Among the pavilion's other high-concept efforts is Alexander Ponomarev's Windshield Wipers (2007), which presents a salad of video news clips that are periodically rinsed and swept from the monitors by bus-size wiper blades, to be briefly replaced on the screens by a live video feed showing the bucolic stretch of park behind the pavilion. A comparable

antipathy to processed information is expressed in Ponomarev's collaboration with Arseny Mescheryakov, Shower (2007), a three-sided stall tiled with monitors that deliver over 1,000 channels. You can step in and turn the faucets to shift between news, sports and porn (streaming video indeed), but you can't turn the shower off. Russia is one of only a few countries to mount a group show in the Giardini, where the prestige of sponsoring a pavilion is accompanied by the necessity of coping with limited space. In 1988, Switzerland began to divide its presentation between its main pavilion and the Baroque church of San Stae. For this year's installation in the church, Urs Fischer and Ugo Rondinone have constructed a four-wall, floor-to-ceiling, white-cube gallery space that totally and rather perversely obscures the landmark interior. To this familiar yet out-of-place environment, Fischer has contributed three muted screenprint-on-aluminum abstractions and Rondinone three arthritic-looking olive trees, cast in aluminum and painted white, plus a tiny and ineffectual incense burner embedded in one wall. It's a chill and gloomy jest. Back in its pavilion, Switzerland is showcasing Yves Netzhammer's raised, ramped and improbably welcoming plywood lounge, in which he screens a lengthy digital animation, and Christine Streuli's gorgeous series of hallucinogenic pattern-on-pattern murals. It's the one strong showing in the Giardini's otherwise limited and flaccid selection of paintings, which includes Herbert Brandl's by-the-book gestural abstractions in the Austrian pavilion (an act of penance, perhaps, after Hans Schabus was permitted to bury the entire building in a giant mountain in 2005) and Troels Worsers colorful fields with letters and symbols in the Danish pavilion. Architecture, not painting, is on the mind of Monika Sosnowska. Into the little Polish pavilion, she has inserted a steel armature that replicates the building's real structure but sags and bows in a state of rubbery-looking ruin. As you stoop and twist to wander through the limp cage, the piece becomes an effective symbol of the collapse of institutions, Communist or otherwise. A maze awaits in the Belgian pavilion, where the performance artist and intellectual poseur Eric Duyckaerts has erected his Palace of Mirrors and Discoveries. To view the monitors that show videos of his recent performances--perfectly nonsensical lectures and conferences on assorted disciplines--you enter a bafflingly

reflective glass labyrinth. Among the topics is the matter of whether cheese or spinach pie is better for attracting a rat. Please discuss. While it's dicey to generalize about the independently curated national pavilions, a number of the artists share a preoccupation with mannequins, body casts, taxidermy, the fate of the natural body and the environment. (Whew.) Playing off the skylights and exposed beams of Canada's rugged pavilion--so different from the would-be temples nearby--David Altmejd has crafted a setting of fearsome and chaotic hyperfecundity using mineral specimens, wood, stuffed creatures, mirrored shards, plastic flowers, drips of paint, clumps of fur, bristling conifer needles and bird-headed men in suits. Nestled within is a reclining giant, more crystal than flesh, at once a cyborg and a weirdly animate corpse. Isa Genzken dwells on some aspects of climate change in the German pavilion, where her show is titled "Oil"--basic shorthand these days for filth, greed, death and environmental rape. Backpacks, life-size figures in space suits, grotesque dolls on stools, taxi-dermied birds and reproductions of works by Canaletto and Rembrandt all conjure a world of mass consumption, falsehood, toxicity and mutation. Genzken tries to ratchet up the level of global instability and junkiness by covering the pavilion's facade with orange plastic webbing, installing huge mirrors at the entryway and draping a plastic tarp over the marble floor. So routine are these ploys, however, that the strongest image of all winds up being the one on the show's poster, a nocturnal view printed in green of a diseased-looking Venice and bearing Genzken's portentous title. The artificially enhanced human body takes center stage in two pavilions. Korea's Hyung-koo Lee, who claims to suffer from "undersized Asian male complex," has rigged up a series of absurd prostheses and a pristine white lab to treat what ails him. In the pavilion shared by the Czech and Slovak republics, a life-size cast of artist Irena Jizova's lovely body dominates a mock boutique, which purveys smartly boxed synthetic organs, hands and feet to (dare I say it?) a well-heeled clientele. Controlling, not reshaping, the body is the subject of "Citizens and Subjects," Aernout Mik's sober installation in the Netherlands pavilion, which was prompted by a consideration of what it means to have a "national" pavilion at a time when domestic debate in the West has come to

focus on illegal immigration, and fear has turned a worldwide refugee crisis into a matter of law enforcement. Mik's three new videos present training sessions in which police recruits are taught to subdue suspected illegals, training sessions (surprisingly convincing ones at that) staged by the artist, and documentary footage of real encounters between police and immigrants. His architectural intervention in the pavilion, which incorporates prefab elements used to fashion a mock detention center for the shoot, may be more of a distraction than an enhancement. In the pavilion of Great Britain, the subject is also the body--Tracy Emin's body, over and over and over again. With pieces from the mid 1990s to the present, "Borrowed Light" offers a few assemblages of scrap wood that look like campfires, a handful of cleverly worded neons and far too many drawings and paintings of the nude artist, some small and quite nicely rendered, some with embroidery, that replay Emin's standard fare: erotic obsession, anger, profanity, confession. Emin might have done well to seek some relationship advice from Sophie Calle's friends. Calle's absorbing and frequently funny installation in the French pavilion is called "Take Care of Yourself," the title reiterating the parting sentence of the e-mail with which (so the premise goes) Calle's lover ended their relationship. Puzzled by the message and its final injunction, Calle submitted the communication for analysis to some 100 women, each of whom responded according to her training or profession: psychotherapist, criminologist, actress, diplomat, 18th-century scholar, Talmudic expert (who, needless to say, answers Calle's question with another question). Texts, videos and photographs of the interpretations and their authors fill the pavilion. The response of the artist's mother (whose recent death is the subject of Calle's work in Storr's group exhibition) mixes the best of maternal consolation--"you'll soon find someone better"--and clairvoyance--"for you this breakup could be the wellspring of a new piece of art." One place where the erotic and the physical have been resolutely downplayed is the U.S. pavilion. The show of works by Felix Gonzalez-Torres (1957-1996) was organized by Nancy Spector of the Guggenheim Museum, and one can't avoid surmising that this highly regarded but long-deceased artist was the Trojan horse by which the Guggenheim, which administers the pavilion, could finally exercise

curatorial dominion there as well. After years of experiencing testy opposition to its potential influence in Venice, the Guggenheim--bearing gifts of free candy, an endless supply of takeaway offset prints and festive strings of light bulbs--has occupied the pavilion with nary a peep of art-world protest. While Spector's catalogue essay gives due attention to Gonzalez-Torres's homosexuality and committed political activism, the reverently installed mini-survey conjures an artist of almost saintly selflessness: San Felice delle Lampade. The works feel oddly dematerialized and slight, an impression underscored by the selection of the artist's one hokey billboard--a view of the sky with a lone bird in flight--to be installed at sites around Venice as a "comfort" in the midst of urban bustle. Oh, please. Pavilions, Pavilions Everywhere Lending a hand with the overabundance of national sponsors, the Arsenale has taken in four pavilions. Turkey's entry consists of Huseyin Alptekin's spare, subdivided wooden construction with tables, which mimics Turkish restaurants that offer cabinlike rooms to groups of diners. Inside, Alptekin presents videos of ordinary daily experiences on small monitors suggesting family TVs. The People's Republic of China marks its second Biennale outing (the first was 2005) by pointedly showing four women artists under the dubious rubric "Everyday Miracles." The strongest pieces happen to be outdoors, in the garden area at the rear of the Arsenale, and they address, in different fashions, the human desire for a fresh start. Shen Yuan presents *The First Voyage* (2007), an installation of oversize pacifiers, bottle nipples and other infant paraphernalia, scattered as if a careless toddler had tossed them across the grass. A video, displayed within a giant formula bottle, shows Western parents transporting their newly adopted infants (and bags laden with real baby supplies) through an airport and on to a new life. Nearby, in a rounded white enclosure, is Cao Fei's *China Tracy* (2007), a digital installation featuring the artist's online avatar in the virtual reality realm called *Second Life*. The Italian national pavilion has been resurrected in the Arsenale following an eight-year hiatus that saw the host country's official representation absorbed by the international group exhibition. The safely unsurprising artists for 2007 are Giuseppe Penone and Francesco Vezzoli. In a career of just 10 years, Vezzoli has been selected twice before for the

group show, and is fast becoming a spoiled pet of Biennale curators. His two-screen *Democracy* (2007) stages a noisy, cliché-laden contest between the campaign ads of a stereotypical liberal, played by the actress Sharon Stone, and a stereotypical conservative, played by the philosopher Bernard-Henri Lévy. Suffice it to say that nightly news satires on basic cable produce smarter parodies than this. Penone, a senior figure of Arte Povera who had his first show in 1968, three years before Vezzoli's birth, has tackled an enormous space with four grand works. Massive tree trunks, a wall-size installation of animal hides and an exquisitely contoured and veined marble floor exemplify the formal and functional homologies that Penone discerns throughout nature. The scale is imposing, and the materials are masterfully handled, but the ensemble lacks the poetry that would shore up its essentially literal thesis, while deploying animal skins as if they were wallpaper seems insensitive, if not wanton. The show that stirred the most advance debate, "Checklist: Luanda Pop: The African Pavilion," turns out to be a lively though mostly mainstream assortment of contemporary art from around the globe, with a celebrity-heavy list that includes both black and white artists who were born on the continent or are part of the African diaspora (Ghada Amer, Chris Ofili, Marlene Dumas, Yinka Shonibare, Kendell Geers, Minette Vari, Jean-Michel Basquiat) along with some others (Andy Warhol, Alfredo Jaar, Miquel Barcelo) whose connection to the continent is tenuous at best. Among the artists who don't yet have marquee names, Loulou Cherinet is showing *White Woman* (2002), a staged and frequently lewd dinner conversation among a group of black men, who also share some more philosophical observations about the meaning of marriage in a life spent traveling between Europe and Africa. Bill Bidjocka continues his ongoing book-and-archive project, *Pourquoi Faire?*, which invites visitors to inscribe responses to suggestively free-associative questions (*La Beante est convulsive. Pourquoi faire?*) in a large blank book. Set up in a chapel-like space with a surveillance camera projecting the book and the moving hand high on the center wall, the work has the effect of turning visitors into scribes, if not prophets, who record the articles of an unspecified faith. As if a homogenizing, pan-Africa approach were not enough to set off some critics, the works in "Luanda Pop" all belong

to Sindika Dokolo, a businessman from the Congo who is now based in Luanda. In the exhibition handout, Dokolo specifies that his is an African collection, not a collection of African art (hence Warhol?), and that he intends it to be the basis for a projected Center for Contemporary Art in Luanda. That plan is endorsed in an accompanying statement by the president of the Republic of Angola (who happens to be Dokolo's father-in-law). At the very least, accepting the exhibition can be seen as inadvertently placing the Biennale in the service of Angola's business and government elite. It's hard to imagine the title of official "national" representation being similarly granted today to a European or U.S. private collection. Beyond the Arsenale, the national pavilions are spread far and wide. Portugal is installed in the early 17th-century Fondaco Marcello, a low warehouse structure that opens to the Grand Canal and perfectly suits Angela Ferreira's "Maison Tropicale." Ferreira excavates the story of the three prefab house prototypes designed by Jean Prouve and sent to French colonial Africa in the mid 20th century. The prototypes were forgotten for decades, until the designer's star rose again. Purchased by a Paris dealer, the houses were dismantled and returned to France for restoration. (One was displayed in Paris and New York last spring before heading to Christie's, where it fetched nearly \$5 million.) As if to propose a structure that is both crate and cargo, Ferreira has made an elongated, shipping container-shaped abstraction of a Maison Tropicale in lumber, aluminum and steel. The construction is accompanied by her photographs of the now empty lots in Niamey and Brazzaville where the houses stood for decades. We are left to question whether the three modernist relics have been "repatriated" to their culture of origin, or if Africa has once again been robbed of a part of its own heritage. Another kind of meditation on heritage is undertaken by Guillermo Kuitca, who is representing Argentina with a suite of four Pollock-size paintings that selectively encapsulate the legacy of Cubism. Installed near the Fenice in a 17th-century meeting hall, Denouement I-IV (2006-07) progresses from a dark slate field of angular planes to a less congested field, then on to a diptych that incorporates a red composition with painted slashes in the manner of Lucio Fontana (who was born in Argentina), to conclude with an atmospherically

treated surface marked with more illusionistically painted slashes. Kuitca is wrestling with a lot here: the leaden gray evokes Leger rather more than Picasso and Braque, and where the paint is most active, it brings to mind Venice's own Emilio Vedova. The illusionistic slashes recall the painted "tear" in the work *Tu m'* by one of Cubism's great skeptics, Duchamp. It's a brave gambit for an artist to think out loud like this. The handsome paintings are earnest and perplexing, and more than a bit melancholy: where does a painter go after the denouement? There is nothing tentative about Rafael Lozano-Hemmer's hardware-heavy and technologically agile works in the Mexican pavilion, accommodated in the 15th-century Palazzo Van Axel near the Rialto. The artist's interactive and kinetic projects (the earliest dates from 1992) establish an interface between electronics, mechanics and the human body. Premiering here is *Wavefunction* (2007), in which the entrance of a visitor into a sensor-rigged room triggers a sequential rising and falling of 50 empty Eames chairs mounted on pistons. The effect is ghostly and slapstick ("please don't get up"), though it's based in some serious technology that involves surveillance systems and a program that generates mechanical behaviors. Sponsoring one of the more modestly funded national pavilions, Lebanon makes its official debut in a former brewery on the Giudecca with five featured artists plus a supplemental video series presented on a monitor. Most impressive among the works by the principal artists are Mounira Al Solh's *As If I Don't Fit There*, a 12-minute video in which the artist assumes the guise of four women who explain their decision to abandon art-making for other roles and jobs, and Fouad Elkoury's *On War and Love* (2006), a suite of 30 color photographs with texts that detail the wrenching breakup of the artist and his younger lover during the time of last year's shelling of Beirut by Israel. Denied the luxury of humor enjoyed by the love-challenged Galle in the French pavilion, Elkoury questions the very possibility of intimacy. Albania's first pavilion, near Palazzo Grassi in the Palazzo Malipiero, offers a small group show on the theme of dislocation and placelessness. The strongest piece here is Armando Lulaj's *Time Out of Joint* (2006), a two-channel color projection that shows, on one screen, the daily maintenance work in a municipal garbage dump and, on the other, the behavior of the Roma children

who play there after the artist has placed a tall block of ice, like an alien monolith, amid the trash and ashes. The footage is simply presented, dispassionate and hard to forget. Estonia shares the Palazzo Malipiero and presents "Loser's Paradise," Marko Maetamm's multipart installation with videos and constructions. Assuming the persona of a desperate artist forced to choose between his calling and his family, Maetamm concocts a wonderfully whiny and self-justifying background story, improvises some nursery furnishings that double as what can only be called "child-disposal units" and projects a hilarious paper-puppet animation with scene after scene of extravagantly bloody mayhem in the home. Art demands sacrifice. Beyond the Fringe: Collateral Shows and More The absence of a buzz-worthy international group show has conspired with the generous geographic dispersal of the offsite pavilions and an uptick in the number of well-organized unaffiliated shows to engender an unusually porous-seeming Biennale. More than ever, the event is decentralized and citywide. From a visitor's perspective, the distinction between officially recognized collateral shows (which receive support from the Biennale administration) and the field of opportunistically scheduled exhibitions is pretty much moot. The collateral designation has traditionally been used to welcome a political entity or cultural presence that the Biennale's nation-based structure would otherwise preclude. Accordingly, a group show from Hang Kong is accommodated across from the Arsenale entrance. Here, the artists who call themselves MAP Office (Laurent Gutierrez and Valerie Portefaix) recall Hong Kong's long lost primordial jungle by creating an oyster shell-covered island outfitted with mist machines and fake parrots on sticks. At one point, a scoop of shell powder was carried through the Arsenale to the pavilion of the People's Republic of China to observe the 10th anniversary of the transfer of the island from British to Chinese hands. Biennale collateral diplomacy has also sanctioned an exhibition for Northern Ireland consisting of three videos by the master of paranoia and passive aggression, Willie Doherty. The highlight is a new work, Ghost Story (2007), which introduces the use of a first-person voiceover (by the actor Stephen Rea) that details the speaker's mounting anxiety as he is unable to order, much less interpret, his own fragmentary and

sometimes violent memories. Other artists spotlighted in collateral shows are Bill Viola, Jan Fabre and newcomer Stas Polnarev. *Ocean Without a Shore* (2007) finds Viola again using water imagery and the human figure in a work conceived for projection above the three altars of the tiny 15th-century church of San Gallo near San Marco. In seemingly randomized sequences, the projections cycle through footage of some 25 individuals who approach us from "the other side," penetrate a membrane of rushing liquid, regard us dolefully and return to the digital haze whence they came. The mercurial Belgian artist Fabre is the subject of a solo show organized by the Galleria d'Arte Moderna e Contemporanea of Bergamo, "Anthropology of a Planet." Installed throughout the rooms and entrance courtyard of Palazzo Beuzon, the exhibition recaps Fabre's major installations and also introduces a new series with drawings, sculptures and a video that use the image of the human brain to explore the mysterious relationship between corporeality and the mind. Polnarev's documentary photographs are the main ingredient in "Ruin Russia," an exercise in architectural necrophilia sponsored by Moscow's Stella Art Foundation. The color pictures lovingly record the faded glory and final hours of the now-demolished Hotel Russia, a 2,722-room behemoth that stood near the Kremlin. The images are joined by an audio track of Moscow street noises, replicas of hotel documents strewn on the floor and furniture mournfully draped in white sheets, all of which makes you wonder if the photos have the visual power to stand on their own. Venice's municipal administration and private organizations are behind many of the unaffiliated exhibitions scheduled to capitalize on the Biennale season. The Musei Civici Veneziani has programmed a career survey of Enzo Cucchi at the Museo Correr, an installation of Bertozzi & Casoni's monumental illusionistic ceramic works at Ca' Pesaro and a show of more than 300 objects dating from prehistory to the present at Palazzo Fortuny, which was far and away the most purely pleasurable exhibition in the city. "Artempo: Where Time Becomes Art" is curatorially promiscuous (does anything not fit into a cross-cultural examination of "the relationship between art, time and the power of display"?), and it wittily distributes pieces by Tatsuo Miyajima, Hans Bellmer, Anish Kapoor, Kimsooja, Yves Klein, Sadamasa Motonaga and others among

the Classical fragments and Wunderkammer curiosities hoarded by the fabric designer and esthete Mariano Fortuny. No fewer than five individuals are credited with organizing and curating the show. Prominent among them is Axel Vervoordt, the Belgian dealer and designer from whose collection many of the objects were drawn. The Peggy Guggenheim Collection is presenting a smart and well-chosen show of works by Joseph Beuys and Matthew Barney (previously shown in Berlin at the Deutsche Guggenheim) that persuasively compares the artists' use of drawings, vitrine display, installations, ritualistic performance and invented symbolic systems. The Fondazione Bevilacqua La Masa is behind solo shows by Yasumasa Morimura and Richard Hamilton, each with a distinctive retrospective flavor. Morimura's "Requiem for the XX Century" is on view in the foundation's Piazza San Marco galleries. The Japanese photographer and filmmaker, known for gender-bending travesties of Marilyn and Frida, here concentrates, in works old and new, on male notables like Che, Einstein, Trotsky, Mishima and Mao. Strangest are the videos, the latest of which places Morimura in the role of Charlie Chaplin in *The Great Dictator* (1940). Fortunately--and in a way that characterizes Chaplin's oeuvre, too--Morimura's sincerity and the energy of his impersonations usually offset his moist, fretful sentimentality. Hamilton's show, "A Host of Angels," installed at the Bevilacqua La Masa's second space, in Dorsoduro, finds the octogenarian artist in optimum form. Hamilton's original collage technique has transitioned nicely to the digital age, and he's using computers to synthesize mixed-medium (and sometimes site-specific) compositions that include elements from the interior of his home, Matisse's chapel in Vence and the monastery of San Marco in Florence. There are glowing nudes, too, as well as sly references to Duchamp's brides, Fra Angelico's 15th-century Annunciation and Hamilton's own now-canonical paean to the vacuum-cleaner age, *Just What Is It That Makes Today's Homes So Different, So Appealing?* Possibly the most profoundly surprising show on offer in Venice is the Fondazione Prada's presentation on the island of San Giorgio of two projects by Thomas Demand. Each project inverts our expectations of the German photographer's signature practice of research and model-building. In one instance, Demand not only shows the product, the

large C-print called *Grotto* (2006), but he also has placed on view, for the first time, the hundreds of documents that served the enterprise (in this case a recreation of a subterranean cave in Mallorca) along with the model, clearly not destroyed as per usual, which he pictures: a hulking, 36-ton, computer-based simulacrum whose 900,000 layers of minutely contoured cardboard seem to have accumulated by geological layering. By comparison, the nine pictures from Demand's 2007 series "Yellowcake" look disarmingly familiar: views of a building, its hallway and an office within, all shots of simple paper and cardboard models. They represent the embassy of Niger in Rome, from which were (never) stolen the (forged) documents used to support the Bush administration's (mendacious) assertion that Saddam Hussein was trying to buy uranium for (nonexistent) weapons of mass destruction. In what was, for him, an unprecedented step, Demand did not rely on prior printed documentation to build the models. Instead, he visited the embassy in Rome, where cameras are forbidden. The basis for the models is Demand's own memory, a stark personalization of the artist's usual consideration of history, truthfulness and the photographic document. In its home base on the Giudecca, the independent not-for-profit Nuova Icona screened (in the month of June only) Breda Beban's *The Most Beautiful Woman in Gucha* (2006). Using footage she shot during a week-long battle of Romany brass bands that takes place each year in the Serbian town of Gucha, Beban (who is Serbian-born and based in London) edited a nine-minute opera in miniature that features a voluptuous belly dancer, an impassive manager, a watchful bodyguard, an overheated young blade and a disapproving Western onlooker. Scored with alternating martial and guitar-driven romantic music, the piece is colorful, sweaty and just about perfect. Hans Winkler's *Ezra Pound's Cage* (2007) nearly filled Nuova Icona's auxiliary space in the tiny Oratorio di San Ludovico. The Berlin-based artist reconstructed the cage in which the American-born, pro-fascist poet was first confined after being arrested in Italy by the U.S. army in 1945. According to the accompanying text, the cage is roughly the same size as those used for prisoners at the American base at Guantanamo. On the Horizon: Pinault in the Game For all the many shows on view during the Biennale season of 2007, it is "Sequence

1," a selection of works from the Francois Pinault collection at Palazzo Grassi, that looms as the elephant in the room. This is the second presentation of art from Pinault's holdings since the French billionaire was awarded stewardship of the exhibition facility two years ago [see A.i.A., Oct. '06]. Curated by Alison M. Gingeras, "Sequence 1" (more editions are planned) is a snappy assortment of works by 16 artists, from the young (Kristin Baker, Roberto Cuoghi) to the old (some irresistibly jazzy works from the '60s, a few with neon, by the French Pop master Martial Raysse) to current stars (Robert Gober, David Hammons, Mike Kelley, Richard Prince, Franz West). Rudolf Stingel and Urs Fischer created works for the occasion, and the open area in front of the palazzo is ornamented by a goofy 2006 Stingel-West collaboration that involves a stilt-borne and metal-lined chamber, a chandelier hanging within and, on top, a giant lumpy head, an incongruous specter in white-painted aluminum. In the same too-confident-to-be-stung-by-mockery spirit with which he encouraged Piotr Uklanski to portray him as a Jolly Roger, Pinault invited Louise Lawler, known for her straight yet implicitly critical pictures of art-as-chattel in private collections, to photograph the Palazzo Grassi interior. He also seems to have a thing for crania: the private dock facing the Grand Canal is adorned with Subodh Gupta's sci fi-worthy *Very Hungry God* (2006), a 12-foot-tall, stainless steel skull fashioned of treacherously gleaming kitchen implements. It became commonplace during the Biennale's opening days to contrast the elan of the Pinault exhibition with the studious caution of Storr's. More partial to the latter, Peter Schjeldahl in the *New Yorker* wrote of "Francois Pinault's violently trendy collection... champagne to the main event's tawny port." In alcohol as in art, *chacun a son gout*. But well beyond matters of taste, Pinault's presence in Venice, already considerable, is about to become commanding, and the Biennale probably will never be the same. It was announced last April that the administration of the Dogana da Mar, the late 17th-century former customs warehouse opposite San Marco, had been awarded to Pinault. Under the terms of a 30-year renewable contract, Pinault will develop the site for the permanent and long-term exhibition of works from among the more than 2,000 pieces in his stillgrowing collection. With a newly articulated

mission to emphasize film and digital art, and to collaborate with artists on environmentally scaled installations, the Dogana da Mar is set to become a must-visit venue during Venice's annual film festival and the architecture biennale. Tadao Ando's refurbishment of the facility is expected to be completed in 2009--just in time for the next visual arts Biennale. As Storr notes in his catalogue essay, biennials thrive and local communities benefit in places where audiences have little if any regular access to exhibitions of modern and contemporary art. And so it was in Venice, when a mayoral initiative launched the event in 1895. Today's prospect of the Pinault collection ensconced in a centrally located and architecturally distinctive building presents an unparalleled challenge for the next Biennale and its director. With Pinault holding the contemporary-art wild card, no one can say what will come when two big international group exhibitions square off in Venice. The 2009 Biennale may not turn out to be an outright battle for the hearts and minds of viewers. But it will surely be more consequential than a choice between champagne and tawny port. Salute! The 52nd Venice Biennale is on view through Nov. 21. 2007

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