

Rising to Biennale's curatorial challenge

BY CATHRYN DRAKE

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THE CURATORSHIP of the Venice Biennale—the premier international contemporary art exhibition, which opens this weekend—is the holy grail of the profession. But it's also a high-profile acid test, sure to provoke criticism and head-scratching from its notoriously tough-to-impress audience.

Daniel Birnbaum, the 46-year-old Swedish art critic and scholar who is in charge of this year's event, has a sanguine attitude about the gargantuan task. "I don't feel one has to reinvent it; you just have to make very interesting art projects visible," he says. "I think if the curator is successful, he becomes invisible in a way."

Mr. Birnbaum's challenge is to orchestrate a cohesive, digestible exhibition in the cavernous and meandering spaces of the Arsenale, the former warehouses of the Venetian navy, as a counterpoint to the presentations of the various national pavilions in the Giardini. With the title "Making Worlds," Mr. Birnbaum—joint director of the Staatliche Hochschule für Bildende Künste, an academy of fine arts, and Portikus, an exhibition space, both in Frankfurt—intends to highlight the process of artistic creation. The show interweaves work by artists of previous generations with that of younger practitioners whom they have influenced.

We met Mr. Birnbaum for a walk through the Arsenale and a visit to the Garden of the Virgins, which will host installations in its wild, overgrown environs for the first time.

Q: How do you bring something new to such an established, highly visible and complex event?

In the end it's just about making possible certain things for artists. We have tons of very interesting new artists and projects. I don't think that one has to reinvent the theater stage every time, or the film format, or the novel as a genre. When it comes to exhibitions, of course they are a little bit more changeable: An exhibition can be pushed in the more classical museum-style show or it can be pushed fairly far in some other direction. I don't think we want to turn the Venice Biennale into a poetry slam or a performance festival, but we do have a lot of things that will happen outside of the normal situation: a big parade by Arto Lindsay; a huge number of readings by the Moscow Poetry Club; and two or three evenings with Cerith Wyn Evans in a theater. So there are lots of things that are not installed on a wall or in a space.

Q: How do you curate such an enormous exhibition with so many international participants?

It is an eclectic kind of show, because the individual pavilions are curated by the nations. And just the exhibition at the center, where you can put 100 or 200 artists, is as big as Documenta. What I do with the central international exhibition is up to me, but I could not have done it with three artists. You could do it with 20 artists, but that would be like some sort of global top 20 list, which is also a bit boring. So it's not about the number, it's more about projects and spaces and artistic possibilities. It would be silly to pretend that it's an objective report. In the end it's a selection, just one perspective

about things—my perspective.

Q: What is the title, "Making Worlds," intended to provoke?

One could say that "Making Worlds" is very generic. But what I am interested in is that the sound of it, the ring of it, is very different in different languages. "Making Worlds" is very much about the making of things, related to craftsmanship; whereas "Construire des Mondes" is much more technical and architectural sounding. In German, "Weltenmachen" is more theological, an almost divine creating of worlds. That ambiguity is something I am quite interested in.

Q: What do you think is the role of the Venice Biennale?

I think a curiosity about who we are and where we are is what a show like this should answer to. It does not have to be a big answer, like we are going in this or that direction. But if it were not about our moment now, it would be a strange show. It should not be a show about the 1920s, for example. So we have lots of very young artists. But I think art is different than say pop music or fashion or sports, where every five years there's a totally new generation. Art has a different temporality.

There are several generations in the show. It's a dialogue between generations, so we have several installations from older artists from the '60s and '70s. The main idea is to make visible the moment we are in now, but one needs a little genealogy to understand the present.

Q: As the model for the proliferating international exhibitions, do you think Venice is still the most important?

With all the biennales out there now, there is often the discussion that Venice, with the national pavilions, will be an obsolete model. But the world does indeed consist of national states and of globalizing forces, and some things are the same all over the world. It's a leveling society that we live in, with the same pop music and the same shoes and everything, but there are also differences. And a show like this should try to make visible, not in a reactionary way but in an interesting way, the kind of differences that exist in cultural expressions and views on the world.

Q: What is new at the Biennale this year?

The idea of the Biennale is to go permanent somehow. It is a unique multidisciplinary academy, if you will—with film, dance, architecture, art—and one could have a center where you could do things throughout the year.

The idea is to change its nature, and this can only happen step by step. There is a very interesting archive, for example, which has never been visible, so that will be displayed this year. This central pavilion will become a kind of academic institution: There will be an archive open for scholars, a bookstore by Rirkrit Tiravanija, a cafeteria by Tobias Rehberger and an educational space for children by Massimo Bartolini. Their pieces will be installations, but they will have to work as functioning spaces, introducing gatherings and eating together into the museum. It is like the reality game is now the real thing—a real challenge for those artists.



Biennale curator Daniel Birnbaum.

Cathryn Drake for The Wall Street Journal



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