

Art in America

MELANCHOLY GIARDINI: THE NATIONAL PAVILIONS A Review of the 53rd Venice Biennale

by Lynn Macritchie

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MELANCHOLY GIARDINI: THE NATIONAL PAVILIONS

BY LYNN MACRITCHIE

THE VIEW FROM THE STEPS to the British pavilion, which sits atop a small rise, offers the nearest thing possible to a panorama of the Giardini, still the central site of the Venice Biennale. It reveals an odd assortment of buildings, the national pavilions, dotted among trees and shrubs. Far beyond the Giardini, the exhibition's diaspora sites reach across the city, hosting more national exhibitions, including presentations by Palestine and newcomer Kurdistan.

This year, some artists took the pavilions themselves as subjects. Liam Gillick gave Germany's venue a makeover, installing rows of new, unpainted pinewood kitchen cabinets. Here, the question of national identity—Gillick, representing Germany, is British—seems to have been set aside, a non-issue. Perched atop one of the units, an animatronic talking cat, its words recorded in English, is nearly inaudible in the echoing interior. Titled *How Are You Going to Behave? A Kitchen Cat Speaks* (2009), the piece appears to be an attempt to insert the domestic into the grandiose, the everyday into the symbolic. It doesn't quite come off. Inspired by Viennese architect Margarete Schütte-Lihotzky's designs for her 1926 Frankfurt kitchen, the prototype of today's built-in kitchens, Gillick's numerous, abutting units stretch through the space in bleached perfection. The work's coldly sculptural effect undermines any sort of homey reference. And the stuffed cat, however

loquacious, is sadly laughable rather than fetchingly witty: if only a real cat, elegant and above all silent, could have been persuaded to stalk the pavilion.

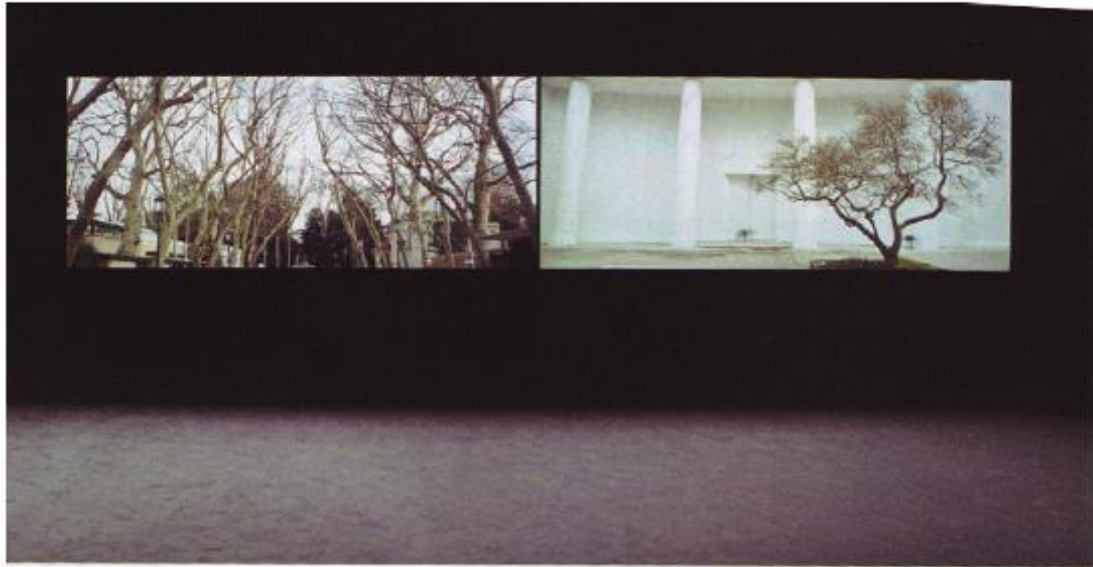
The piece does nearly succeed, however, in suggesting that how you live, rather than where you come from, is what matters—a valid and powerful point also touched upon by Steve McQueen in the nearby British pavilion. McQueen has turned the pavilion into a cinema, with tiered seating and fixed screening times for his *Giardini* (2009). The audience, informed that the film will last a half hour, settles down to pay attention. Attention is what the London-born artist has paid to his theme, a meditation on the Giardini out of season, filmed in February and March 2009. The double-screen presentation opens to the appropriately British sound of rainfall as the camera lingers on the shuttered pavilions. The grounds are strewn with building detritus and patrolled by a pack of stray dogs. There's a human presence, too: an elderly lady with a wheeled shopping bag passes by, and the distant sound of a crowd can be heard. At night, two male figures lurk in the dark. They eventually come together in an embrace. This is how we are, the film suggests—ultimately alone, perhaps, but always with the potential for an encounter and the possibility of love. McQueen's position seems to be that the national pavilions, whatever their official and competitive purpose, are also just things, subject to the dawning and fading of light, the growth of plants, the creep of insects and the scavenging of animals, as well as human encounters—in short, the forces of life itself.

NOT EXACTLY ADDRESSING the purpose and meaning of the pavilions, but examining the lifestyle of those who buy art, Michael Elmgreen and Ingar

View of Liam Gillick's installation *How Are You Going to Behave? A Kitchen Cat Speaks*, 2009; in the German pavilion. Photo Laurent Lecat.

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a satirical tour de force, they have transformed the neighboring Danish and Nordic pavilions into the homes of fictional collectors, enlisting the help of a distinguished band of merry pranksters that includes Wolfgang Tillmans, Sturtevant, Niqa Saunders, Terence Koh, Hernan Bas, Guillaume Bijl, Henrik Olsen and Han & Him. The first "house" ostensibly belongs to a wealthy family who have put the property on the market—a "for sale" sign is planted near the entrance. The second, the home of Mr. B, a bach-

Here, everything is camp perfection. It's a 1960s-style lair for a man with an eye for the boys, some of whose swimming trunks he has had framed, labeled with the former owner's name and mounted on one wall. Esthete, aficionado of the male body and struggling writer of an erotic novel, Mr. B's aspirations may have been his undoing. Notes left on a worktable tell his sorry tale: research for a novel led the would-be author into the darker corners of his psyche; the grittier realms of his erotic dreams apparently

STEVE MCQUEEN'S POSITION SEEMS TO BE THAT THE NATIONAL PAVILIONS, WHATEVER THEIR OFFICIAL AND COMPETITIVE PURPOSE, ARE ALSO JUST THINGS, SUBJECT TO THE DAWNING AND FADING OF LIGHT, AND TO THE FORCES OF LIFE ITSELF.

Opposite top, view of Steve McQueen's *Giardini*, 2009, two-screen synchronized HD video projection, 30 minutes; in the British pavilion. Photo Prudence Cuming, © British Council. Courtesy Marian Goodman Gallery, New York/Paris, and Thomas Dane Gallery, London.

Right, Stefan Constantinescu: *Troleibuzul 92*, 2009, HD video transferred to DVD, 8 minutes; in the Romanian pavilion.

Opposite bottom, view of Elmgreen & Dragset's "The Collectors," showing A. Family's home; in the Danish pavilion. Photo Anders Sune Berg.



elor, is now a possible crime scene: the corpse of the owner—a realistic sculptural figure—floats facedown in a small outdoor swimming pool. Playing potential purchasers, viewers are taken on a tour of the first house by a representative of Vigilante Estate Agents (motto: "Discretion/Integrity/Efficiency"). As its dubious features are pointed out—the lower section of the staircase leading to the library balcony has been smashed, the dining room table is cracked down the middle as if by a mighty hammer blow, the loyal maid has been transformed into a golden statue and there's an enormous crack in the wall—we realize that this monument to privilege is rotten to its foundations.

Next door, though the occupant's recent demise has placed the future

became reality. How did his fully clad body wind up in the pool? We'll never know what terrible thing occurred to turn the sunny dream world of Hockney's *A Bigger Splash* into the fatal nightmare of *Sunset Boulevard*.

At the U.S. pavilion, the joking stops. Bruce Nauman's works are often funny, but his is the mordant wit of a merciless observer of the human condition. The neon signs that run around the pavilion's neoclassical facade re-create his *Vices and Virtues* (1983-88), their flashing words—Fortitude, Prudence, Anger, Gluttony, Justice, Charity, Envy—chastening those who might have expected to stroll blithely into the building. In the entrance hall, the classic 1967 neon *The True Artist Helps the World by Revealing Mystic Truths* remains as provocative as ever. A collection of works from Nauman's

around head and hand pieces, smaller neons, fountains and sound elements, and the rawness of Nauman's materials is consistent throughout. The apparent message—that we humans are ugly, destructive, incoherent and unheeding—is brutally direct. Nauman's show, which won the Golden Lion for best national presentation, is supplemented by two off-site displays featuring recent audio pieces [see sidebar].

ELSEWHERE IN THE GIARDINI, things are hit-and-miss. In the Russian pavilion, where seven artists are shown, Andrei Molodkin's multimedia installation *Le Rouge et Le Noir* (2009) projects mural-scale real-time video images of oil and blood being circulated through two transparent models of the Nike of Samothrace, which stand among the pumps, tubes and motors

DAYS OF OUR LIVES BY PETER PLAGENS



View of Bruce Nauman's *Vices and Virtues*, 1983-88 (installation copy 2009), neon and clear glass tubing mounted on aluminum support grid; at the U.S. pavilion. Photo Marcia E. Vetrocq, Stuart Collection at University of California, San Diego. © Artists Rights Society, New York.

I DIDN'T THINK BRUCE Nauman would win the Golden Lion.

Once I'd traipsed around Venice to the three main Nauman venues—the U.S. pavilion in the Giardini and the two university sites, the *luav di Venezia* at Tolentini and Ca' Foscari—I thought there'd be a backlash against "American cultural imperialism." (I heard that exact phrase muttered by somebody with a press tag at a *vaporetto* stop.) After all, as Carlos Basualdo—a curator from the sponsoring Philadelphia Museum of Art and one of the commissioners of all this Naumania—writes in the catalogue, "Never before 2009, we believe, has the U.S. exhibition been conceptually and programmatically conceived to exceed the physical and ideological limitations of the national pavilions and to establish deeper consonances among the work of the artist shown, the urban fabric of Venice, and the social, ethnic, and cultural constitution of the nation that it is supposed to represent." Which is to say that Basualdo, who teaches part-time at the Tolentini campus, used his knowledge of

the city, familiarity with Italian bureaucracy and a few connections to pull off a coup.

The Nauman mini-retrospective in the pavilion is superbly installed, but most visitors have seen the 15

works before, as is the case with the other 15 earlier works installed at the university sites. One exception: a video'd re-creation by two Italian dancers of a galvanizing and previously undocumented 1970 performance, in which the participants roll and revolve in tandem, like clock hands, until they collapse from exhaustion.

The real Nauman news is the two new hush-hush works, which commissioners Basualdo and Michael Taylor, a fellow PMA curator, handled pre-debut with the level of secrecy Apple maintains while developing a new iPhone. They are pendant sound pieces, *Days* and *Giorni*, similar in content (voices reciting the names of the days of the week) and physical structure. The catalogue succinctly describes them:

The speakers used in [both] are thin, square, off-white, and produce sound in both directions. Ordinary metal clips attach each of them to two floor-to-ceiling steel cables, at eye level, which makes them look like opaque, empty mirrors. When the work is playing, all the voices are heard at the same time, but because the speakers are directional, each of them can also be listened to in isolation.

The difference between *Days* and *Giorni* is that *Days*, housed in a noble room at Tolentini, with a marble statue at one end, is spoken in English, while *Giorni*, at Ca' Foscari, is, appropriately, in Italian. The voices in *Days* are looped, so there's no beginning, no end. *Giorni* has an audio arc, starting with one voice, building in a kind of *rondo* to seven and then dropping back down to one. What are the pieces like to experience? Of course, everyone's experience will be different. I encountered *Days* first and, while others present smiled at the audio-puzzle aspect of it, I teared up. Something about the absurdity of people living and dying, week in and week out, I guess.

Nauman's Golden Lion-winning performance probably deserves a ringing finish here, but I don't have one. The best I can do is offer a raw snippet from my notebook, jotted down in some momentary pause away from his works, as I tried to make sense of all the extravagant social/political claims made in press material and on labels for so much of the work at the Biennale:

NAUMAN, THE NON-RADICAL RADICAL artist is about art, not about society. Art doesn't change society. If you had an overhead view of the art world, without seeing the paintings on the walls, it would look the same whether the artist at work were Andrew Wyeth or Damien Hirst. "Radical" artists simply want, at bottom, a good bourgeois life for themselves so they can keep on making art—which is, after all, a small shopkeeper's enterprise. Otherwise, they'd be real radicals, à la Daniel Cohn-Bendit or Rudi Deutschke. Real radicals take real risks for political/social purposes. Radical artists who take "risks" do it for art and their art careers. Nauman understands this, but still reserves the right to do "radical" or "risky"-looking art because, simply, art is what he has to do to be an artist.

I wonder whether a thought like that occurred to anybody on the Golden Lion jury. ○

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the art market is sustained by worldly struggles for power and resources—is obvious and its realization overdone.

Just how difficult it is to make art that doubles as effective political commentary becomes only too apparent in the French pavilion. The title of Claude Lévêque's installation

Le Grand Soir (2009) is a term referring to a moment of social breakdown, when the established order is extinguished. Lévêque's work, however, with its silvery walls, intensely bright lights, cagelike metal structures and swaths of gray silk billowing like flags in the breeze from electric fans,

is more like an empty nightclub, a kitschy travesty of serious intent.

The Romanian pavilion, by contrast, combines serious content with a clever presentation. A series of interlinking rooms in which intense videos by Stefan Constantinescu and Ciprian Muresan are shown leads to a stair-

case up to *Exuberantia* (2009), a roof garden by Anrea Faciu. Both video artists convey in their works a hidden world of violence, perhaps personal, perhaps driven by politics, lying just beneath the surface of everyday events. In Constantinescu's *Troleibuzul 92* (2009) a man on a bus, ignored by his fellow passengers, talks into his cell phone, threatening horrific violence to an unseen listener. In Muresan's *Dog Luv* (2009), puppet dogs delight in torturing a puppet canine victim, which they address while engaged in a surreal dialogue veering between menace and affection.

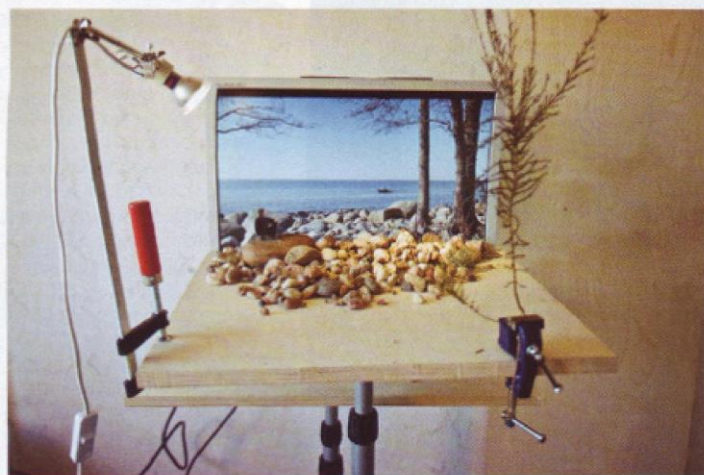
Roman Ondak makes the Czech pavilion all but disappear with *Loop* (2009), an installation that fills the space with plants and shrubs similar to those in the surrounding Giardini; visitors may not realize they have actually entered or walked through a pavilion. But unlike Faciu's garden, which offers a welcome respite from the unnerving videos there, the Czech pavilion's annihilation, although beautifully realized, is little more than a fanciful conceit.

Australia's exhibition of videos and installations by Shaun Gladwell did not disappoint. In the video *Apology to Roadkill* (1-6), 2007-09, a black-clad

motorcyclist stops to cradle in his arms the corpses of kangaroos found by the side of those dead-straight Australian highways. The man staggers as he lifts the heavy creatures: these wobbly pietàs are as touching as they are convincing. Gladwell's *Interceptor Surf Sequence* (2009) shows the same dark figure emerging from the window of a Mad Max-style Interceptor car (now parked outside the pavilion). He

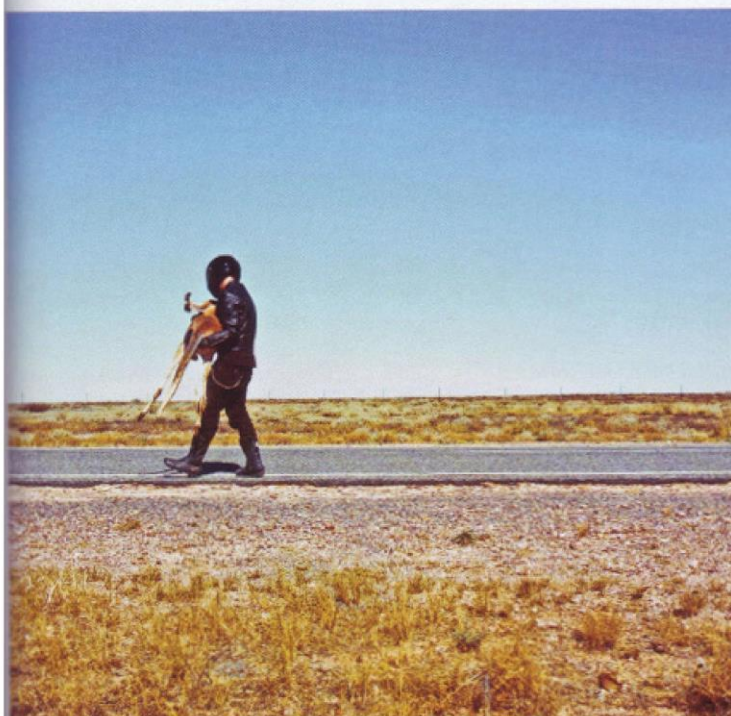
stands on its roof, appearing to "surf" the empty landscape. The video hints at an emotional link between the figure and the land, even as the sinister-looking vehicle despoils the pristine topography.

RETURNING TO THEIR USUAL position in the Arsenale in a space that houses enormous old oil tanks, the Chinese are quite subdued this year.



Above, detail from Miks Mitrèvič's mixed-medium installation *Fragile Nature*, 2009; in the Latvian pavilion.

Left, production still from Shaun Gladwell's video *Apology to Roadkill* (1-6), 2007-09; in the Australian pavilion. Photo Josh Raymond. Courtesy Anna Schwartz Gallery, Sydney/Melbourne.

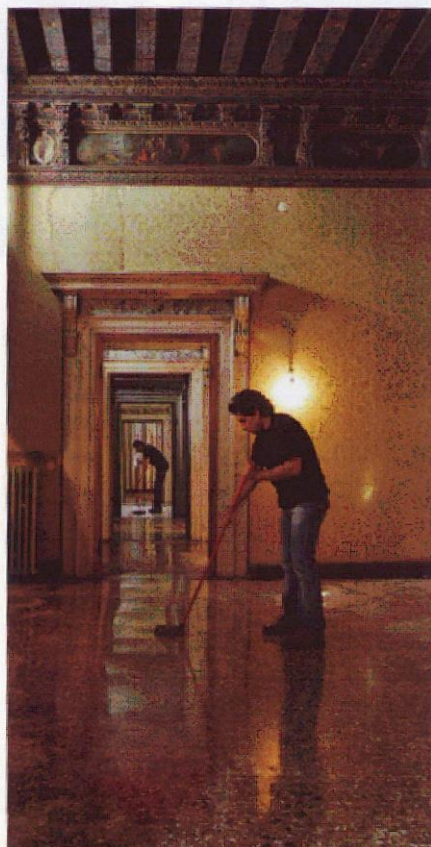


The glass cabinets holding sundry items masquerading as merchandise in Liu Ding's *Store* (2009) are only moderately interesting, and hardly rise to the challenge implied by the work's subtitle, *The Utopian Future of Art, Our Reality*. Even Fang Lijun, master painter and satirist, does not quite bring off his *2009 3 23* (2009), an installation of 40 tiny gold sculptures of heads. The heads are just too small and too roughly modeled to be seen clearly as they huddle spotlighted on the ground, gazing up at one of the looming oil tanks.

Allocated a large space inside the Artigliere, the United Arab Emirates presented what is, in effect, a real estate

VENICE 09

IN TERESA MARGOLLES'S WORK, THE SIGHT AND SMELL OF BLOOD IS SHOCKING, BUT VISCERAL IMPACT ALONE DOES NOT CONVEY THE HORROR OF THE CRISIS, NOR HELP THE VIEWER COMPREHEND ITS TRUE SCOPE.



Above, view of Teresa Margolles's *Cleaning*, from her exhibition "What Else Could We Talk About?" (2009); in the Mexican pavilion.

Opposite, Martin Boyce: *A River in the Trees*, on floor, and *A Forest (III)*, suspended from ceiling, both 2009; in the Scottish pavilion. Photo Gilmar Ribeiro. Courtesy Modern Institute/Toby Webster Ltd.; Galerie Eva Presenhuber; Tanya Bonakdar Gallery; John Gallery.

promotion with incidental artworks. "Familial" (2009), a series of photographs of modest UAE hotel room interiors by Lamy Gargash, is little more than a backdrop to architects' models of UAE museums, both existing and planned, and video interviews with UAE dignitaries, talking up their country's attractions. Turkey's entry, meanwhile, in a wooden hut outside the main Arsenale building, features two artists who demonstrate how information-based work can be displayed effectively. *CATALOG* (2009) by Banu Cennetoglu is a book of hundreds of photographs of a great many subjects, all arranged by category. Taking a page from a tear-off pad encoded with symbols corresponding to the pictures, visitors can order downloads of the images. In *Exploded City* (2009), Ahmet Ogut shows a miniature cityscape comprising models of actual buildings, each of which has been destroyed by some catastrophe. Audio and written statements describe the buildings as if they still exist.

BEYOND THE 29 NATIONAL shows in the Giardini and six in the Arsenale, a further 42 national presentations are distributed throughout Venice. Finding them takes luck, persistence and a better map than the Biennale organization provides. In the Palazzo Rota Ivancich, located on an obscure canal, Mexico presents Teresa Margolles's much-discussed "What Else Could We Talk About?" (2009). Hung on the walls are large canvas sheets saturated with blood collected (we are told) at the scenes of some of the country's thousands of murders. Beneath these gruesome objects, attendants mop the floor with blood-tinged water. Visitors can only watch in silence. The sight and smell of the blood is shocking, but visceral impact alone does not really convey the horror of the crisis, nor help the viewer comprehend its true scope.

The Scottish presentation, "No Reflections" (2009), by Martin Boyce, is one installation occupying seven

rooms of the 15th-century Palazzo Pisani. Like Gillick, Boyce references a work of modernist design: four concrete trees created by Joel and Jan Martel for the 1925 Exposition des Arts Décoratifs inspired Boyce's black-painted aluminium light fixtures that have temporarily replaced the palazzo's chandeliers. The first gallery also features jagged concrete blocks arranged like stepping stones. Visitors must find a way over them to reach the spaces beyond. Cutout paper shapes scattered on the floor like fallen leaves make the blocks seem like a magical pathway spanning the present moment of a Biennale installation to the distant past of the antique palazzo.

In the Latvian exhibition, Mīks Mitrēvics and Evelina Deičmane both deal with the relationship between people and nature. For his installation *Fragile Nature* (2009), Mitrēvics uses odds and ends, such as twigs, chunks of foam rubber, a lawn chair, a hair dryer and photos of various sizes, to create a sense of landscape in which human intervention is always felt. Little figures cut from photographs seem to contemplate their tiny worlds just as the viewer contemplates them. In the video *Season Sorrow* (2009), Deičmane shows the bare heads of a group of people buried up to their chins in snow; helpless, bashful, infinitely cold, they are unable to do anything about their plight: the human condition summed up in a snowdrift.

Solo and group shows, new works, retrospectives, site-specific pieces—the national pavilions house all these things. The variety makes comparison nearly impossible, but at every Biennale there are one or two shows that seem to capture the feel of the times. Overall, this year's mood seems self-conscious and a little subdued. Grandiose gestures—the French pavilion is an obvious example, as is the sanguinary Mexican presentation, trying desperately to shock—fall flat. Among the best presentations, the glorious satire of Elmgreen and Dragset has a melancholy edge. Steve McQueen's film catches this tone of sadness, too, and also manages to escape the trap of self-aggrandizement. The film's long, slow scrutiny of the Giardini suggests that this might be an occasion to pause and really look. McQueen's may not be one of the Biennale's most spectacular offerings, but it is certainly one of the most resonant. ◊