

# frieze

## Think for a Minute. Review of the 52<sup>nd</sup> Venice Biennale

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The demands of blockbuster exhibitions and the space for critical reflection

However relentless the art world you choose to belong to may seem, and whether or not you recently descended into your own version of Bruce Nauman's sunken Square Depression (2007) from Sculpture Projects Muenster 07, you may have had a quiet moment to reflect on the 52nd Venice Biennale, documenta 12 and Muenster and catch your breath before the daunting new season of exhibitions and biennials interspersed with international art fairs begins. Poised now at a perhaps illusory moment of fleeting calm, it seems right to me here not to use the voice of privileged fatigue, disingenuous cynicism or niggling doubt, nor to show broad-brush ingratitude for all the ambitious endeavours and ideas – good, bad and ugly – just experienced. Rather, I'll simply mention something modest that I thought was engaging in the midst of it all.

One of the welcome surprises – who doesn't like being caught off-guard by the unknown or unexpected? – among the enormous amount on offer was the curated group show 'Low-Budget Monuments' in the Romanian Pavilion at Venice. Featuring Cristi Pogacean's bird house (Obelisk, 2007), Mona Vatamanu and Florin Tudor's pierced cement bags (Dust, 2005–7) and Victor Man's fur padding between the letters on the pavilion's façade (Monument to Victor Man, 2006), the show was manageably scaled and conceptually pointed, and suffered from none of the glaring faults of being overblown, attention-seeking, pretentious, retrograde or unduly conservative. It didn't punish, bore or misjudge its demanding audience, and its expectations weren't out of whack. The theme of the show – the reconsideration of the monument(al) – was a great idea in the context of the massive Biennale and of Venice, which, as Wolfgang Tillmans remarked to me as we leaned over a crooked marble railing, is the ultimate city of vanitas. It is this quality, incidentally, which makes this showy, crumbling and rotting shrine to yesterday's trade, wealth and power a perfect site for contemporary art.

Apparently an unprecedented number of art worlds or spheres of activity are growing faster than bubbles blooming out of a fast-filling hot bath, connecting and colliding, inflating and, some worry, threatening to burst. Against this backdrop, even before the first screw was put into a wall, reducible and the demanding. Perhaps the task is to start radically differentiating – to expand the space of critical reception and not to be deluded by your own or others' apparent successes. There is a lot more art out there, but who wants to invest the time and thought to make it meaningful?