



VOLUME 26 ISSUE 3 MAY 2011

12th Istanbul Biennial

Marcus Verhagen

The institution of the biennial is burgeoning – and in crisis. While biennials proliferate across the globe, commentators point out that they tend to be unwieldy, centrifugal affairs with grand titles and thin curatorial premises. Many also hold that the biennial does no favours to quiet or demanding work; in shows too sprawling for their curatorial scaffolding vast showstoppers, works more likely to inspire awe than sustained engagement, tend to set the tone. Meanwhile, biennial curators regularly stress that they want to raise the visibility of non-Western artists, while continuing to give pride of place to artists who work in or near the old centres of the commercial artworld. And many biennials are designed to burnish the cultural credentials of their host cities in the eyes of tourists and potential investors; their cultural and political ambitions are often undone, or at least compromised, by their instrumentalisation at the hands of political patrons and sponsors.

The biennial has largely internalised these common criticisms. Artists have aired their misgivings in pieces such as *De Novo*, the film that Dominique GonzalezFoerster made for the 2009 Venice Biennale, in which she detailed the disappointments of her previous participations, or *Death in Venice*, a piece by Gonzalo Dí'az for the pavilion of the Istituto Italo-Latinoamericano in 2005, which used letter-shaped fish tanks to spell 'ARTE' and so clearly likened the Biennale to a fishbowl and those involved in it to fish – colourful, essentially idle and oblivious to external concerns. Since the last Documenta, many curators also appear to have taken the critique of the biennial to heart, organising shows that have been markedly more subdued. In curating the 2009 Biennale, for instance, Daniel Birnbaum clearly set out to avoid the louder and more bombastic passages of previous editions.

The 2011 Istanbul Biennial, curated by Jens Hoffmann and Adriano Pedrosa, does not just tone down the more contentious aspects of earlier biennials – it proposes a substantively different experience, one that is at once less miasmic and more challenging.

While earlier editions of the Istanbul Biennial used various venues in different neighbourhoods, Hoffmann and Pedrosa concentrate theirs in two vast neighbouring warehouses divided into variously proportioned rooms and a web of narrow passages by the architect Ryue Nishizawa, who seems to have drawn inspiration from the narrow streets and bazaars that are among the major tourist attractions of Istanbul. Otherwise, the biennial is free from the reductive exercises in site-specificity that regularly mar other biennials (how many Murano glass chandeliers do we have to see every two years in pieces made for the Biennale?). Just as unusual is the roster of artists: more are from Latin America and the Middle East than from Europe and the United States and about half of them are women (ingeniously, the curators withheld the names of the participating artists until the day of the opening).

The curators have organised the biennial around five iconic works by Felix Gonzalez-Torres which, though not on display, are described in wall texts in five large nodal spaces, the works serving as lodestars for the thematic displays in those rooms. One of the nodal spaces, for instance, is called Untitled (Death by Gun) after a work of the same name that was realised by Gonzalez-Torres in 1990, a stack of sheets detailing the many fatal incidents of gun violence that occurred in the US during the first week of May in 1989 and listing the 460 people who died in them. The works on show in this room look at war and criminality and at the gun as a prop in the games of children and the fantasies of adults. The other nodal rooms address issues around abstraction and the everyday, historical documentation and censorship, desire and prejudice, and migration. Around and between these spaces are over fifty smaller rooms, each devoted to a single artist or collective whose work directly or indirectly broaches the same concerns.

What distinguishes this biennial from others is above all its polemical sharpness. This is plainly not the result of a narrow thematic remit; although the nodal rooms take five works by the same artist as their inspirations, they touch on a broad range of issues. But unlike other major biennials, Hoffmann and Pedrosa's is not a survey of significant

contemporary figures and tendencies. It is a biennial that advances a thesis and advances it throughout, in the solo displays as in the nodal rooms, though the thesis is most forcefully and programmatically articulated in the nodal space 'Untitled' (Abstraction). This room takes as its point of departure GonzalezTorres's drawing 'Untitled' (Bloodwork – Steady Decline), 1994, which turns the grid pattern that we now associate primarily with Modernist abstraction into a graph, a diagonal line from top left to bottom right tracing, so the title implies, the declining T-cell count of a person with AIDS. Among the pieces in this tightly curated room are a number of recent grid-like compositions, including a large collage of neatly arrayed film stills by Joana Hadjithomas and Khalil Joreige, a piece made out of anti-pigeon netting by Cevdet Erek and a collage composed of newspaper pages without the articles by Jorge Macchi. Works that apostrophise Lucio Fontana's slashed canvases, Kazimir Malevich's monochromes and Frank Stella's black paintings are also on display. What they share is a demystifying thrust: in most of these pieces the protocols of abstraction are crossed with materials and concerns that were largely excluded from abstract painting and sculpture in the mid-twentieth century, including the body and the paraphernalia of day-to-day existence. They work against the totalising ambitions of early abstraction, the phallic grandstanding of Abstract Expressionism and the crimped manoeuvres of Post-Painterly Abstraction.

In many cases the corruption of abstract effects opens the work up to the explicit consideration of political questions. The over-exposed stills in Hadjithomas and Joreige's *180 Seconds of Lasting Images* (2006), for instance, were drawn from a film made by Joreige's uncle prior to his kidnapping during the Lebanese civil war: their grid-like arrangement and near-monochromatic tonality suggest abstract precedents, the paintings of Agnes Martin for example, but these turn out to be unrevealing. Like many other works in the room, the collage by Hadjithomas and Joreige wrong-foots the viewer by alienating formal values from their ideological bases. The grid here points to the time that has passed since the kidnapping; the frames are analogous to the pages of a calendar. And the bleached tones can be read as referring both to the white flag of surrender and to fading memories – of ordinary familial events such as those that were described in the original film by Joreige's uncle and, more generally, of the victims of political violence. This interleaving of

formal and political concerns is repeated in different ways and with different results in many of the works in the room and throughout the biennial. It is for this reason that the curators chose to present Gonzalez-Torres as a guiding figure. As they put it in the catalogue: 'Gonzalez-Torres's work is both politically provocative and rigorously attentive to the formal aspects of artistic production. The artist. . . successfully negotiated the territory between the personal and the political while maintaining an extremely sophisticated formal vocabulary.' 1

In the wall texts and catalogue, the curators advance two distinct perspectives on the intersection of the formal and political registers of cultural communication. At times they focus on the poetic expression of political convictions, while at others they concentrate on the repurposing of existing forms, be they formal devices like the grid or conceptual vehicles like the archive, for the articulation of (new) political narratives or ideals. A third and related thread emerges in the displays themselves. Throughout the biennial, both the curating and the works draw out tensions between artistic forms and political narratives. The existence of such tensions is not a given, of course: the paintings that hang in corporate lobbies demonstrate how seamlessly artistic devices can be made to chime with given socio-political values. The same is true of certain works in the biennial, though the values in question are different. Elizabeth Catlett's mid-twentieth-century images of sharecroppers, with their crisp outlines and declarative gestures, clearly use an idiom that derives from Mexican and European visual traditions of popular militancy. But in the biennial, more often than not, visual cues brush against the grain of implied political ideals or messages. And the tension between them provokes a jolt that has an interpellating effect; it serves to implicate the viewer, to quiz his or her reactions, to involve him or her more urgently in the disentangling of interpretive threads.

This is disconcerting. In the nodal room *Untitled (Death by Gun)*, next to the wall text describing the work of the same title by Gonzalez-Torres, is a provocative arrangement that consists of documentary images of Chris Burden's 1971 *Shoot* performance (in which a friend shot the artist in the arm), the notorious photographs by Eddie Adams of the execution of a Vietcong prisoner during the Tet Offensive in 1968, and Roy Lichtenstein's smoking gun cover for the 21 June 1968 issue of *Time*. This triad has the effect of unsettling

the assumptions we bring to each of its component images. Burden's performance can be understood as a response to the gun violence that was at issue in Time, or as another instance of it. The works by Burden and Lichtenstein can be seen as expressing horror, but some viewers, seeing them alongside the images of the execution, will feel that they trivialise violence, or even take pleasure in it – certainly, the Lichtenstein cover mobilises all the comic-book signs of suspense, expressing, albeit ironically, a childish excitement. More disturbingly still, the arrangement can be understood as suggesting that Adams's photographs are to be viewed, like Burden's, as documenting a performance. That is a perverse suggestion but also a grimly revealing one: as Susan Sontag maintained, the scenes that were captured by Adams were in all likelihood staged by the executioner, the South Vietnamese chief of police, for the camera. This is not irresponsible curating, though it runs the risk of being perceived as such: it is a sequence that lifts the images out of their ordinary contexts so as to renew their sting, while at the same time reminding us of the expectations and automatisms that we bring to different orders of representation and that often cloud our perception of specific images.

Similar strategies are at work in the solo displays. A case in point is the room given over to Alessandro Balteo Yazbeck and Media Farzin who show a series of pieces, collectively titled *Cultural Diplomacy: An Art We Neglect (2007–2009)*, in which the mobiles of Alexander Calder oddly intrude, in the manner of Woody Allen's *Zelig*, at crucial junctures in the Cold War and in more recent conflicts. One piece includes a photograph of Calder's *Orange Mobile (1946)* as it is installed in the Tehran Museum of Contemporary Art, where it hangs alongside portraits of Ayatollah Khomeini and the current Supreme Leader, Ayatollah Khamenei. A text beneath the photograph points out that while Calder was working on his mobile the US and Soviet Union were manoeuvring to gain control of Iranian oil; the text also outlines the later efforts of the Shah's regime to develop, notably through the Museum of Contemporary Art, the cultural trappings of Euro-American modernity. In another work in the same series, the artists create a large Calder-like mobile, the suspended elements of which resemble the oil fields of Iraq as they appear on a map that is shown on a nearby wall. This series encourages the viewer to see signal works of modern art not as autonomous productions but as symbolic operations that can serve a

variety of more or less unlikely political ends. It presents a complex and witty commentary on the significance of art as an instrument of soft power, though this commentary would have been more effective still if the works had not left their own formal and institutional engagements largely unexamined.



Installation shot of: Eddie Adams, *Viet Cong prisoner being escorted, Saigon, 1968*, *Street execution of a Viet Cong prisoner, Saigon, 1968*, *General holstering gun after execution, Saigon, 1968*, gelatin silver prints, each 27.9 x 35.6 cm, courtesy Monroe Gallery of Photography, Santa Fe, USA, photography: Eddie Adams; Chris Burden, *Shoot, 1971*, three black-and-white photographs and descriptive text from Shoot performance, each photograph 20.3 x 25.4 cm, courtesy the artist; and a copy of 21 June 1968 issue of Time magazine

In this regard, Simryn Gill's *My Own Private Angkor* (2007–2008) is more compelling. A large collection of black-and-white photographs, the work surveys an upmarket housing complex that was built in the Malaysian coastal town of Port Dickson in the 1980s but never occupied. Thieves who took the aluminium window frames left the glass panes they once held neatly stacked against walls and Gill focuses on those panes, which catch and refract the slanting light in rooms that are littered with dust and leaves but otherwise empty. Plainly, there is a story behind these pictures – one that revolves around new-found prosperity and real estate speculation, perhaps, in any case one that involves

bureaucratic dysfunction. Gill herself speculates in the catalogue that the estate was abandoned because the developer fell from favour, possibly for failing to bribe local officials. But cutting across and marginalising this proto-narrative is the elegance of the pictures, with their spare compositions and evocative lighting, and their sheer number, which also militates against their relevance as social documents, given that each new picture offers only as much information as was available in the last. The series, which advances a contemporary gloss on the Romantic theme of the ruin, is marked by an anomalous nostalgia – anomalous because it looks back to a past that never was. So it holds two readings in a tenuous balance, an incomplete account of a politically resonant project and a poetic but bizarrely insubstantial survey of a place, each reading calling into question the reach and significance of the other.



Simryn Gill, *My own private Angkor*, 2008, gelatin silver photograph, paper: 56.5 x 48.5cm, image: 40 x 38 cm, courtesy Amrita and Priya Jhaveri

The biennial, with its nodal rooms and solo displays, astutely varies its pacing and this contributes, like the punctuation of a sentence, to the coherence of the whole and hence to the urgency of the thesis that underlies it. Time and again, the biennial argues for the relevance of artistic concerns in the expression of political positions. More particularly, it foregrounds work in which the uneasy concatenation of artistic and political values serves to prick and so summon the viewer who is conceived throughout not just as an informed observer but as a social and political actor. In the catalogue, Doug Ashford of Group Material says of the collective's AIDS Timeline (1989), to which the curators have devoted a room: 'These objects could be made by artists or not; they could be found or made; they could show different scales of investment in the field of art or in the field of social effect. The resulting ensemble was then physically designed to position the viewer at an apex of juxtaposition and comparison.' This last sentence effectively describes the thrust of the Biennial which, in room after room, positions the viewer 'at an apex of juxtaposition and comparison'.

NOTES

1. Jens Hoffmann and Adriano Pedrosa, 'Introduction', in *Untitled (12th Istanbul Biennial), 2011: The Companion*, Istanbul Foundation for Culture and Arts and Yapı Kredi Publications, Istanbul, 2011, p 23
 2. Susan Sontag, *Regarding the Pain of Others*, Hamish Hamilton, London and New York, 2003, pp 53-54
 3. *Untitled (12th Istanbul Biennial)*, op cit, p 185
 4. *Ibid*, pp 190-191
- # Marcus Verhagen, 2012
<http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/09528822.2012.679044>