

ART FORUM – December 2004

Bienal de São Paulo Pavilhão Ciccilio Matarazzo

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“The purpose of a biennial,” proclaims the curator of this one, Alfons Hug, “cannot be to exhibit convictions.” A little reflection suggests just how much conviction it must take, paradoxically, to admit as much. In his catalogue introduction, Hug implicitly contrasts the exhibition he set out to organize with other recent international presentations based on “documentary strategies.” In a pragmatic age he positions art as a vehicle for neither the good nor the true, but the beautiful. No wonder, then, that (at least in his essay) Hug assigns a leading role to painting in general and abstraction in particular. “The mystery of painting,” he avers, “lies in the fact that a tiny brushstroke tears up the veil of the ordinary and brings to light a new world whose mysteries cannot be solved by mathematicians’ statistics.”

This begs the question as to whether the “new world” supposedly revealed by art is, in fact, anything more than a sentimental mirage in the eye of its beholder. In any case, viewers committed to an anti-aesthetic are certain to leave this biennial disappointed. But are those inclined to sympathize with Hug’s viewpoint as likely to feel fulfilled? The answer, of course, depends less on the curator’s principles than on his eye. Responses will inevitably be mixed, but just how mixed will hinge in part on how viewers feel Hug has negotiated his institutional and physical constraints. Like Venice, this biennial combines a curated exhibition with a series of “national representations” outside the curator’s control. The difference is that here, the two are not physically separate: Both are housed in a vast exhibition hall designed half a century ago by Oscar Niemeyer. The biennial presents the curator’s choices chockablock with the national artists whom he must somehow combine gracefully with his own concept.



Christine Felten and Véronique Massinger, Bruxelles, *Chaussée d’Etterbeek*, 1999, color photograph, 39 3/8 x 87”.

In this regard, fate has presented Hug with a number of real gifts, above all the work of Belgians Christine Felten and Véronique Massinger, whose extraordinary panoramic landscape photographs were made with a van converted into a giant pinhole camera. Rarely do images communicate such a profound sense of contact with place. Likewise, the intricate and disquieting architectural wall drawings of Argentinean Pablo

Siquier—which amount to a sort of Piranesian abstraction—and Bolivian Roberto Valcarcel's *Escala de cuantificación*, 2004—a set of geometric paintings in the form of signs distributed throughout the hall purporting to measure the presence or lack of subjective qualities such as passion—add particular notes of finesse and wit.

Other notable national representatives include Thomas Demand (Germany), Esterio Segura (Cuba), Mike Nelson (Great Britain), Harris Kondosphyris (Greece), and Péter Szarka (Hungary). One crowd-pleaser is Miguel Calderón's video *México vs. Brasil*, 2004, which was edited from footage of soccer matches between the two national teams so that the perpetual underdogs, his own Mexico, are for once made to win—a “new world” indeed! In a gesture that other nations might be well advised to follow, the United States did not name a representative but donated its budget to support the presence of ten American artists selected by Hug—among them painter Inka Essenhigh (whose catalogue entry I contributed) and such less familiar names as film and video artists the Neistat Brothers and photographer Alec Soth.

Aside from this mixing of “curated” and “national” artists, the architectural character of the hall abetted a certain segregation by medium that was unfortunate: big installations on the ground floor; paintings in more intimate and evenly lit spaces upstairs; projections in a sequence of dark rooms nearby; and so on. Even so, Hug robustly demonstrates that “painting full of relish and mystery”—he quotes the German art historian Hans Belting—is hardly alien to our time. The new works by Luc Tuymans, for example, are superb. Some depict scenes from the Binche Carnival in Belgium, challenging the stereotype that carnival is an essentially Brazilian occasion while showing that even such festivities are fit matter for Tuymans's typically subdued treatment. Thomas Scheibitz, whose crisp facture and acidic palette may not immediately seem to claim the psychological weight of Tuymans's saturnine atmospherics, shows himself to be a master visual composer with just as incisive a viewpoint as his older colleague. And Beatriz Milhazes continues to succeed brilliantly in, as she has put it, “making the eye roll.”

But despite what he seems to say in the catalogue, Hug favors no particular medium in this exhibition. *The Spectrum of Brick Lane*, 2002–2003, David Batchelor's tower of colored lightboxes and steel shelving, presents as much “relish and mystery” as any painting. So, too, do Thomas Struth's photographs of Peru, Hans Hamid Rasmussen's funky embroideries, Jorge Pardo's architectural fantasy, Yin Xiuzhen's colorful, toylike urban landscape, made by seamstresses during the course of the exhibition, and Aernout Mik's video installation *Pulverous*, 2003, which contemplates with dry hilarity a group of people slowly, meticulously, and expressionlessly destroying the contents of a large grocery store. This last work mirrors the humor of Paulo Bruscky, whose madly crammed studio/office in Recife has been reconstructed here and thereby turned into a strange sort of fantasy, a whole-world gathering in reduced format. It is a little biennial unto itself, and like the larger one around it, an undertaking in which conviction is not lacking but is nevertheless trumped by curiosity.

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