

Drawing strategies at the Venice Biennale 2011

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This article attempts to communicate the unique ambience and scale of Venice during its Biennale; to draw attention to four sets of questions highlighted by the 2011 event; and to focus on a few projects (including their drawing details) exhibited there. These art works and their drawing details remain indelibly embedded in the author's visual memory as articulate responses in political registers to the questions raised, while generating a sense of hope.

Key words: drawing, Venice Biennale, political registers, hope

Tekenkunsstrategieë by die Venesiese Biennale 2011

Hierdie artikel poog om die unieke atmosfeer en skaal van die Venesiese Biennale oor te dra; om die aandag te vestig op vier stelle vrae wat in die kollig gebring is deur die 2011 geleentheid; en om te fokus op enkele projekte (insluitend hul tekeningbesonderhede) wat daar uitgestal was. Hierdie kunswerke en hul tekeningbesonderhede het onuitwisbaar deel geword van die skrywer se visuele geheue as politiese teensang wat sprekend reageer op die vrae gestel, terwyl die werke terselfdertyd 'n sin van hoop kon genereer.

Sleutelwoorde: tekenkuns, Venesiese Biennale, politiese teensang, hoop

The Venice Biennale is accepted by many as being the largest and most comprehensive exhibition of contemporary art in the world. Established in the late nineteenth century as a gift to the wife of the ruler of Venice, this event has since happened every two years without fail, which made this year's biennale the 54th of its kind. Going to Venice seems like a kind of pilgrimage. Paolo Baratta, President of the Venice Biennale Foundation, speaks of it as "...a wind machine...it shakes the forest, discovers hidden truths and gives strength and light to new offshoots, while giving a different perspective to known branches and ancient trunks..." (2011: 31). He continues by listing the various "pillars" of the event: the pavilions of eighty-nine participating countries who sent representations to the event this year; the international exhibition constructed by the biennale curator; and the officially accepted forty collateral exhibitions. It is interesting that Baratta adds to this list the spaces inhabited by the art works plus the city of Venice itself as an active participant in the extravaganza which is the biennale (see 2011: 34).

One could also add to Baratta's list the extensive other layer of concurrent contemporary exhibitions organised to coincide with the biennale, as well as the matrix of permanent exhibitions of modernist and historical works spread across the geography of the city. All experienced together, Venice presents the viewing visitor with a performance like no other, while also providing an opportunity to remain current with the continuously changing face of contemporary art. The vast scale of the Venice Biennale makes it impossible to do justice to the whole; any particular author can only shed light on a small part. This article attempts to communicate the unique ambience and scale of Venice during its Biennale; to draw attention to four sets of questions highlighted by the 2011 event; and to focus on a few projects (including their drawing details) exhibited there. These art works and their drawing details remain indelibly embedded in the author's visual memory as articulate responses in political modes to the questions raised, while the works also generated hope.

Arriving at Venice's Marco Polo Airport, one has to board a boat to the city. This trip normally takes an hour, during which outlying islands come into view while Venice slowly reveals herself to the traveller. Many earlier visitors to the city – Turner, Monet, Ruskin – have

left us with their own impressions of this place which is like no other in the world. As a boat turns out of the Adriatic Ocean into the Grand Canal, one can identify with their experiences. And, almost immediately, signs of the biennale add to the visual bustle: flags fly, banners announce, *portegas* and *sottoportegas* open away from the *fondamenti* along the canal into the fabric of the city and invite one's eyes inward to the feast of visuality waiting within. Once landed, one has to negotiate one's ways along the density of Venice. Here is a city with almost no streets, no vehicular traffic, many narrow *portegas* opening suddenly and unexpectedly into *campos* which provide social foci for the life of inhabitants and the many visitors.

Despite the fact that Venice receives around twenty million tourists every year, it is noticeable that most of them are not interested in the biennale nor in concurrent exhibitions. One sees flocks of tourists shopping or waiting in queues to enter the Basilica San Marco or the Ducal Palace. The inconvenience of queues does not pertain anywhere else during one's perambulations around the city. Visitors who go there to see art seem to spread themselves thinly across the many large and small venues covering the entire terrain of the island. Although one has no sense of being rushed or jostled at these venues, Venice is an extremely exhausting experience. One is confronted by so many art works, each inviting a different response; and even outside exhibition spaces one's eyes find no rest because the architecture of the city provides still more visual overload.

The decayed surfaces of walls in the city display a myriad of marks, colour tones, textures and striations. Narrow walkways bring these close on both one's right and left side. Visual relief only arrives when one enters a *campo* and even then, more visual interest is present in decorated churches, lavishly ornamented interiors and partial views into yet more narrow pathways. The architecture of the city shows elements of many styles: Ottoman Turkish, Renaissance and Baroque, eighteenth- and nineteenth-century restorations, influences from Islamic North Africa and the far East. One is reminded of the city's history in travel and trading, of its eclectic social make-up and its love for extravagance and luxury evident in its architectural detailing. Everywhere, there is an abundance of the visual.

Walking through the quiet *Giardini* – public gardens – of Venice brings some visual relief. In these gardens many national pavilions held their contents within simple architectural boundaries. On entering these – one by one – a clear understanding of a particular country's representation became possible in the relative silence. Amongst these pavilions sat the *Padaglione Centrale* in pride of place with a selection of international works brought together by 2011 biennale curator Byce Curiger from Switzerland. Nearby, the old barracks, now known as the *Arsenale*, housed a linear display of more national representations along its narrow spatial layout. These were interspersed with works by individual artists forming part of collateral exhibitions. The *arsenale* culminated with the much enlarged Italian Pavilion curated by Vittorio Sgarbi this time around. Across a narrow canal, the South African exhibition was shown inside a small tower.

Along the walk back to the inner city, many further small and large venues held national representations or collateral shows by individual artists and more of these could be found across all parts of the island, often adjacent to the concurrent exhibitions of modernist and historical permanent collections. Many of these exhibitions aligned with the central theme of the 2011 Venice Biennale as chosen by Curiger and her team, namely *ILLUMInations*. In retrospect, some key questions are posed by the Venice Biennale and highlighted by its 2011 title. Art works elicit these questions and respond to them, without providing definitive answers.

First set of questions: The format of the biennale still follows its original plan: a focus

on nation states and the art that would define them. Now in the early twentieth-first century, one wonders how this still fits with the pan-European dream of a union across the continent. One also wonders how the format can still align with the fact that millions of refugees and migrants from nation states criss-cross the globe in various states of homelessness, either forced or by choice. Border-crossings and subversions of national ideals occupy much space in the margins of twentieth-century art and moved to centre stage in contemporary art. So, why still national pavilions?

A work in the 2011 New Zealand Pavilion at the Palazzo Loredan dell'Ambasciatore responded to this question. Commissioner Jenny Harper oversaw the presentation of Michael Parakowhai's work entitled *On First Looking into Chapman's Homer* at this venue.



Figures 1 and 2

Michael Parekowhai, *Story of a New Zealand River (He Korero Purakau mo Te Awanui Te Motu)*, part of *On First Looking into Chapman's Homer* (plus drawing detail, 2011). http://www.creativenz.govt.nz/assets/paperclip/artform_promotions/images/157/normal/venice1.jpg?1316997709.

Michael Parekowhai is a New Zealand artist of both Māori and European descent. His contribution to the Venice Biennale in 2011 consisted of various pieces shown inside the palazzo and in the adjacent garden. This article focuses only on the work shown in the images above. The visitor to this work hears music played from afar and it creates an ambience before one even enters the space. Classical European piano music is heard through the narrow walkways of Venice; in the Dorsoduro District where the Accademia Museum of historical art on the one side and the Peggy Guggenheim Museum of Modern Art on the other side overwhelm the viewer with European culture.

On entering the central space of the Palazzo Loredan, one sees only one ensemble: a large concert grand piano with an open back, a music stool, and the person dressed in black playing the piano. Views to other interior spaces and to the garden provide glimpses of other work. But, in this space, one is confronted with only this one surprising ensemble. Knowing the work of Parekowhai brings to mind that all his previous pianos are black, one with black arum lilies on top in an elegiac pointer to the tragedy of Māori near extinction in Aotearoa/New Zealand. One thinks of the title of Parekowhai's show: *On First Looking into Chapman's Homer* which refers to John Keats's 19th-century poem (1816) with the same title. In this poem the European

awareness of other worlds, for example of the Pacific, is suggested with a sense of foreboding: “Then felt I like some watcher of the skies/When a new planet swims into his ken;/Or like stout Cortez when with eagle eyes/He star’d at the Pacific...”.

Parekowhai’s piano in Venice was a triumphant red with paua (abelone) and polished brass inlay glowing like gold leaf in the play of light: red and gold – the colours of Venice. The quintessential European object – a grand piano – holds many references to Parekowhai’s earlier work and to the role of this instrument in the New Zealand film *The Piano* (1993) directed by Jane Campion. At the Palazzo Loredan, the red piano is moreover intricately carved with traditional Māori motifs derived from the ancient practice of drawing on the body with a tattoo needle and transferring the same drawings into the practice of woodcarving.

The meanings of Māori drawing in tattoo or woodcarving remain obscure to European eyes. Many modernist artists – such as Gordon Walters – have used these drawings as formal elements in their own work, a practice which led to much critical debate in New Zealand during the 1990s and beyond. As a Māori artist, Parekowhai has access to the cultural content of the drawings, not merely to their formal configurations. But, even for a European New Zealander (or Pākehā), the significance of the red piano is clear. In this work, the issue at the core of New Zealand identity as a nation is succinctly summarised: the interface between Māori and Pākehā cultures and how they mutually affect and change one another within a political exchange of contact.

Despite migrations across the globe, despite multicultural encounters and the demise of the ideal of nation states, the bicultural basis of relations in New Zealand still comes first in this country where the conundrum of ‘nation’ has not yet been solved between two co-existing cultures sharing the same space, place and government. Parekowhai’s *Story of a New Zealand River (He Korero Purakau mo Te Awanuiro Te Motu)* performs, however, as an optimistic – even triumphant – statement of hope: two cultures can share the landscape/body of the same eloquent object. And, then there is the sound: it fills the space – as the artist said in conversation in Venice – “like no object can” (2011). The sound emanates from the object in the middle of the space and creates an ambience which is more than the sum of its parts, also spilling into the adjacent space of the garden where a small bronze olive tree is ‘planted’ in a pot. The cultural interplay between the old and the new world is provided with yet another optimistic note, however small and in its infancy the ‘tree’ may be.

For most New Zealanders, the work at the Palazzo Loredan does not collapse into the larger framework of the Venice Biennale: it stands for a particular geographical and cultural past, present and future and vindicates the Biennale concept of bringing together the issues that form our shared world, while remaining specific to a particular place.

Second set of questions: Much of contemporary art is process-based with its best context being the studio of the artist, there where it all actually happens *in situ*. How can the dynamics of the work-in-process be translated when it is transported thousands of miles away from the studio and curated into a presentation show inside a prestigious pavilion bearing the weight of national pride and the artist’s accountability as a chosen representative? How can the dynamics of an artist’s engagement with the world be illuminated through exhibited work for an audience?

Contemporary Flemish painter Luc Tuymans curated the work of Walloon artist Angel Vergara for the Belgian Pavilion show entitled *Feuilleton*.



Figures 3 and 4

Angel Vergara, Feuilleton (installation view plus drawing detail, 2011). <http://www.modernism.ro/wp-content/uploads/2011/08/Angel-Vergara-Feuilleton-Belgian-Pavilion-@-The-54th-International-Art-Exhibition-of-the-Venice-Biennale-1-mic.jpg>.

On entering the Belgian Pavilion one immediately sensed the energy of a performance. On opposite walls, Vergara projected images from current political ‘broad sheets’ – newspapers, websites, blogs, television reporting – and projected over these his real time performative responses to corruption, greed, posturing, and the excesses of power through the use of painting to highlight or to obliterate. The paintings were then also isolated as aesthetic objects divorced from their performance context and hung on the remaining walls of the pavilion. The viewer thus had two distinct experiences: energetic, active performance process work versus abstract paintings of which the exquisite detailed surfaces drew one into a contemplative space.

Through the use of digital media Vergara has been able to translate the energy of the studio into the pavilion context of the Venice Biennale. The interface between painting and moving image energised the space; while differentiation between a more ‘public’ space and a more ‘private’ space through an opening in a wall, allowed for both aspects of his practice to share the same pavilion.

The complex interplay between active and contemplative; between large scale and small scale; between fields of political events and abstract details lifted Vergara’s work to a level of intricate engagement for the viewer. The weight of expectation was carried well by his work because he engaged with the world around him, while also creating moments of quiet focus on the methodologies of painting and its history. Moreover, the aesthetic remains of the active performance process suggest something of detritus, the leftovers of an abstract tradition, that which is left when the action is over.

But, it is the detail of drawing inside the works where a lyrical experience resides. Yet another layer is added to Vergara’s work as active performance, documentary detritus, surprising fields of gestural drawing with a brush; all the more complex because we remember their erstwhile life as responses to political events. Here it behoves us to remember that the feuilleton was “originally a kind of supplement attached to the political portion of a French newspaper” (www.en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Feuilleton).

Third set of questions: Molly Nesbit stated within the context of the Venice Biennale in 2003 that today “...the arts are entering the space outside themselves, looking hard to the future” (2003: 34). In 2011, the biennale title *ILLUMInations* led to the question as to how actual events and interventions in the ‘real’ world – which the arts have entered arguably to an extent as never experienced before – can be truly present within exhibition work. Real-world urgency and the agency of individuals and collectives in that world can often become passive as ‘mere documentation’ in exhibited work. How to overcome the limitations of exhibition work, especially when the work is exhibited in a showcase such as Venice, far away from the struggles amongst which it originated?

Egyptian artist Ahmed Basiouny died from gunshot wounds in Tahrir Square during the 2011 Egyptian Revolution and became an emblem of hope for many millions of people in his country. Prior to his death, Basiouny worked on a performance project titled *30 Days of Running in the Place*. He ran energetically in a structured space in a sensor-fused plastic suit through which the relationships between energy output and consumption input could be quantified and shown visually as grid drawings on a large screen.

Excerpts from this performance were shown in large scale projection alongside video documentation of the Tahrir Square uprisings, also done by Basiouny, specifically during the last days of his life. The flow of resources measured in Basiouny’s energetic performance functioned as an enactment of what is needed for the sustenance of life in the face of the greed and corruption to which the communal energy of the crowds had been responding. The effect is illuminating for those who were not present in Tahrir Square.



Figures 5 and 6

Ahmed Basiouny, *30 Days Running in the Place* (plus drawing detail, 2010, curated as a whole in 2011).
<http://english.ahram.org.eg/NewsContentPrint/5/0/13655/Arts--Culture/0/Venice-Biennale-exhibits-Egyptian-artist,-Ahmed-Ba.aspx>.

The Egyptian Pavilion at the Venice Biennale pulsed rhythmically with the amplified recording of Basiouny’s running in place and his heartbeat. The effect was one of determination, endurance and staying-power constantly reflected in drawing details on the blue chart measuring input and output. Adjacent to this, the crowds in Tahrir Square were surging and enduring despite attacks from armed police. The large projection screens in a long row within the pavilion created a kind of panorama as far as the eye could see to both left and right, top and bottom. As a viewer one became engulfed within the hard rhythm of the pulsating whole of the work. Basiouny’s performance reflected the performance of the crowds and vice versa. Again, the energy contributed by digital media and the scale of the work overcame limitations. The viewer became

physically engaged with the issues at hand; one became a player in this political scenario, albeit for a short while.

Fourth set of questions: When work is embedded within relational projects, such as in events of commensality where eating and drinking together are part and parcel of the actual work, how can this be translated into its new existence far away from home? Nicolas Bourriaud has written about relational aesthetics as an aesthetics which accepts that "...the role of artworks is no longer to form imaginary and utopian realities, but to actually be ways of living and models of action within the existing real..." (1998: 13). Bourriaud sees art as a "state of encounter", as a creator of "bonds that link individuals together in social forms" (1998: 42), with such social forms often taking the shape of convivial sharing. There are many examples dating back to the 1960s and more recently including Philippe Pareno and Rirkrit Tiravanija's events arranged around food. How can such events translate to the Venice Biennale?

Hsieh Chun-te is a Taiwanese artist whose large photographic works in a set entitled *RAW* was brought together to fill a small building in the Santa Croce district of Venice. Aptly, the building used to house a culinary school as the artist himself owns a restaurant in Taipei called *C'est bon*, through which he has contributed much to local culinary traditions in his country.



Figures 7 and 8
Hsieh Chun-te, *Le Festin de Chun-te* (plus drawing detail, 1987-2011).
http://24.media.tumblr.com/tumblr_lkw8ibeyva1qzhpko1_400.jpg1.

The works exhibited as part of the official collateral events at the Venice Biennale were very carefully curated to fit precisely into the spaces available. Each work hung on its wall as if the format and scale were chosen for the site. A part of the space was used as a food area: green leaves glowing luminous against the pervading black grew in long horizontal planters; food was served at particular times on a long black table in beautiful plates. The space was experienced as a kind of chapel, possibly due to the altar-like 'apse' at the far end: a chapel in mourning for mutilated bodies and simultaneously a chapel for celebration of the continuance of life despite the tragedies of our time.

Photographic images were disturbing as the artist situated the images in a part of Taiwan which is quite distressed as a post-industrial site. Naked bodies lying forlorn in a derelict space or hung from clothes' lines; sexual acts with a crowd of men looking on; an ominous low-flying

plane redolent with suggestions of nuclear disasters; and some simple, very beautiful images of a lonely girl and a bride with veil flying in the wind jostled for attention.

The dark sootiness of the photographic ‘drawing’ contrasted with the fresh spring green of the growing leaves; and the colourful crowd who participated in commensality contrasted with the tragic mood emanating from the works. Carefully orchestrated, the relational aspect of the work created a new context for itself as it was situated next to the fish and vegetable markets of Venice. These open air markets display a huge range of nature’s bounty: burnt sienna crayfish, pink salmon, green mussels, silvery trout, all possible shades of mushroom, flaming red chili, purple grapes, lemons, red cut pomegranate and much, much more.

The visitor to *Le Festin de Chun-te* could not separate the work from the market ambience in the Santa Croce district. Regional and global flows of culinary delights and the politics of food in a post-industrial context were highlighted. Chun-te orchestrated an industrial sublime with all the awe and terror associated with a world past redemption, but he also inserted a sense of hope through commensality and an invitation to his audience to relish what we do still have: sustenance and its beauty – a beauty all the more appreciated when we realise that its bounty may be circumscribed in our over-consuming world.





Figures 9 and 10

Zhang Huan, *Friendship (Two Women)* plus drawing detail, 2007. <http://artobserved.com/artimages/2011/06/venice-biennale-palazzo-grassi-Zhang-Huan.jpg>.

The works discussed briefly above elicited and responded to sets of questions relevant to the Venice Biennale. As mentioned earlier, a range of large-scale exhibitions also coincided with the Venice Biennale. One of these showed a selection from the François Pinault Collection in the opulent Palazzo Grassi, situated in the affluent San Marco district. Walking in this area and entering the venue, one was again reminded of the city's history as a place of luxury and wealth, still evident in its architecture and ornamentation. One set of works on show contrasted starkly with its environment. Zhang Huan's large-scale drawings with incense ash were pared back to suggest a disciplined lifestyle, even perhaps poverty, in the age of Mao Zedong (of which a portrait was included). In terms of attention to drawing and drawing details, this work stood out as a companion piece for the others discussed earlier.

The artist explained that the Buddhist "...temple is a completely separate world of hope, just as a hospital is a world of struggle with pain and death... Upon seeing the incense ash left behind from...prayers, I was very moved..." (2011: 239), he said. The incense ash is fixed with adhesive spray, much in the same way as charcoal is fixed. Due to the greater granularity of the ash, the outcome is partly blurred and the artist uses this to great effect. The works at once reveal and conceal and contour lines are difficult to define. In the work imaged here entitled *Friendship*, the drawing detail shows how the blurred contours perform a closeness more literally denoted by the title. Silvery bits in the ash create a luminous glow which seems to underscore the importance of the relationship suggested.

Byce Curiger (curator of the Venice Biennale 2011) wrote: "...it has been sought to create possibly unexpected meetings between works by artists from different cultural horizons and who work according to different criteria. This is because we are convinced that the world of art is not only a colony of individuals who act alone: it is primarily a community of shared intentions... *ILLUMInations* is...intended to illustrate one of the characteristics of art: to be [an] illuminating experience" (2011: 37).

The works briefly discussed in this article come from widely divergent contexts; they deploy the graphic quality of drawing through a range of media: woodcarving, paint, digital screen, photographic processing, and incense ash. These works illuminate through cultural specificity, political engagement, the energy of agency, attention to place and community, and a reverence for the hope which “springs eternal in the human breast” as put by Alexander Pope so many years ago in 1733. Hope is what one takes away with one after seeing these works, despite the ugly or complex issues they address.

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