

*Giorgio Verzotti*

The call for me to participate as a curator of the Venice Biennial came in January 1997. Considering that this international survey of art was due to inaugurate June of the same year, the timing speaks volumes about how this edition of the Biennial started out. As is so often the case in Italy, curators of institutional exhibitions were nominated very late in the game due to bureaucratic and/or political wrangles. Since the Venice Biennial relies on decisions made by representatives of the various political parties within its executive, it should come as no surprise that the art directors of the various sections are nominated at the last moment, and that consequently, they are required to work in great haste.

Never, though, had the Biennial director, in our case Germano Celant, been called upon to direct in November while being expected to keep to the traditional summer opening.

Celant, in turn, advised me, along with the other co-curators Nancy Spector, curator of the Guggenheim Museum, New York, and Vicente Todoli, director of the Serralves Foundation, Oporto, that I would be part of a line-up of collaborators featuring art critics associated with in museums.

Our task would be to curate the exhibition "Future, Present, Past" at the Italian Pavilion in the Castle Gardens and at the Corderie dell'Arsenale. In an initial meeting in New York, all four of us outlined the general theme that would underpin the Biennial. As time was of the essence, we were unable to work out a serious critical theme for our historical overview that was to be the central, the only one at the Biennial. Furthermore, there would be fewer showcase spaces available: only the Italian Pavilion and the Corderie dell'Arsenale.

We confined the general theme of the Biennial to within strict parame-

ters. Given the lack of time to draw up a useful critical line for our interpretation of the events in art of the last years, we swiftly agreed that the exhibition should be restricted to a selection of the most significant artists culled from the major tendencies in Europe and America from the past thirty years. The time span we settled on was 1967-97.

The first task for each curator was a list of international artists for consideration: these selections would point us towards our final selection. Meanwhile, curators were asked to provide as much information as possible on young or unknown artists. Unfortunately, "Aperto" would be (inevitably) absent this time round, which meant that we found ourselves pushing young artists within the historical exhibition in a bid to make up for Jean Clair's willful omission of recent-generation artists from the Biennial's previous outing.

Following this first encounter, we each set about contacting artists or galleries for relevant documentation for scrutiny at our next meeting: Venice. I, personally, was dealing with the Italian contingent, gathering photographic and bibliographical information on the most interesting Italian artists, as well as contributions from elsewhere in Europe, including France, Germany and England. All materials that reached Venice were viewed by Spector, Todoli and myself, Germano Celant having the final word.

During our initial meetings in Venice—which were accorded less than a week—the initial selections were made regarding both "historical" and young artists. Meanwhile, we, and a panel of experts nominated by Celant, were examining the exhibition spaces at the Italian Pavilion and the Corderie, to have an idea of the logistics of for the planned show.

Documentation and reflections on the general themes of the exhibition called for continuous contact and research in preparation for our third appointment, again in New York, where all the documentation on artists old and new had arrived courtesy of the artists themselves or their galleries.

During the second New York appointment, the fundamental choices regarding the exhibition were made, including those that would affect the younger artists' line-up. This proved to be the most laborious phase, with the usual discussions between curators regarding the choice of artists concentrated to a bare minimum because of the dramatic lack of time. In extreme cases, of which there were many, artists were selected on a basis of majority consent. Any divergences in opinion between curators were resolved in the name of urgency. This said, the identity of the show had already taken form. Nothing uncommon about it, I would go so far

as to say that the objective difficulties we faced led us to conceive the Biennial as it should be: an overview of the best from the international art scene today as opposed to the usual exhibition shtick, often based on themes-as-pretexes and serving, more than anything else, to provide a sort of self-portrait of the critic-curator.

Spector, Todoli and myself were also outlining the themes for the critical text for publication in the general catalogue of the Biennial and, along with Celant, designing the catalogue for the historical exhibition "Future, Past, Present". The idea was to ask a number of art critics and experts in aesthetics for a contribution, however brief, on a specific theme which the author found particularly relevant to the artistic and cultural life of the thirty-year period the exhibition was addressing. The final list of contributing authors invited totalled some sixty international names of various nationalities. It was our task to approach each one informally before their formal invitation from the Biennial.

Back in our respective countries following this third meeting, I set about contacting the artists who, through mutual agreement, I would be directly responsible for (Mario Air, Vanessa Beecroft, Giuseppe Gabellone, Marie-Ange Guilleminot, Luca Pancrazzi). Together, we would decide which works to use and the organisational aspects of their participation which called for further reconnaissance visits to the exhibition spaces. The installation by Marie-Ange Guilleminot would prove particularly complex as the artist required various different materials, not only for the exhibit itself but for use in front of the public in real time. Other collaborating partners would also be involved. Telephone calls and faxes with the Biennale from the Castello di Rivoli where I am usually based, were a daily occurrence.

Meanwhile, I was also drawing up the text *Future Present Past, a View from Inside* in collaboration with Nancy Spector, and the *Object* section I had selected for the catalogue accompanying the historical exhibition. From the middle of May, I moved to Venice where I could oversee the exhibition and catalogue preparations close at hand. Along with Antonella Soldaini, assistant to Germano Celant, I first of all worked on the catalogues for both exhibitions, in particular proof reading and checking the visuals.

Next, I turned to the actual installation of the pieces, especially at the Corderie, where I collaborated with the Biennial staff. This, usually, is the least "theoretical" and less obviously gratifying phase of the process, but it is also here that one gets a greater insight into the true nature of the artwork, where we see it as a physical entity in all its structural char-

acteristics: and the Biennial was no exception in this respect. Personally, I was particularly involved in the installation of works by Air, Beecroft, Gabellone, Guilleminot, Komar & Melamid, Bertrand Lavier, Annette Messager, Maurizio Mochetti, Mariko Mori, Pancrazzi, Pipilotti Rist, Andreas Slominski, Haim Steinbach, and Franz West.

A lot has been said about this Biennial. The absence of important artists such as Kosuth or Kounellis and of representative younger artists such as Barney or Damien Hirst came in for particular criticism. It should, however, be pointed out that one criterion we had set ourselves was that no artists who had been present at "Aperto 93" should be included.

The one exception to this is Pipilotti Rist whose inclusion was due to the great importance had work assumed since then. As for the other omissions, these were motivated by certain critical choices, the first of which was that we should not pay excessive attention to artists and artworks which, while certainly fundamental, are also overly "ideologized", out of due respect for the spirit that reigns nowadays. Obviously, we accept full responsibility for such choices.

Personally, I feel I can say that the Biennial as it ultimately turned out, for all its limits (some artists were unable to participate due to problems of time) cut a far from shabby figure. I would even go so far as to say that it is a perfectly worthy competitor against almost any of its previous editions, despite the pathological race against time to complete it.