

JONATHAN TURNER. Venice is a city with a long history of Byzantine confrontation, crumbling buildings, political intrigue and a daily assault by thousands of tourists. On show until November 21, the 52nd Biennale of Venice, directed by Robert Storr, is a mega-event full of images of buildings in ruins, unsettling sites of political or religious significance, allegories of death and portraits of tragedy. Never the most cheerful of cities, this year, thanks to a powerful and political Biennale, Venice feels like a war zone. >

THE 52ND BIENNALE DI VENEZIA **VENICE - THE NEW WAR ZONE**

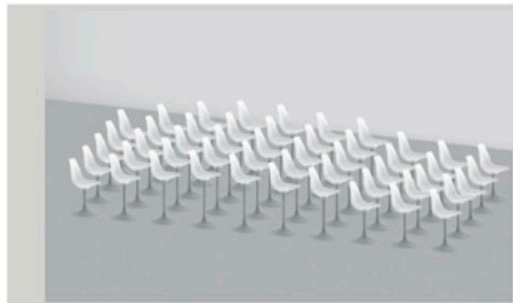
‘Sadly this is a period when ideological, cultural and religious antagonisms - rather than nature - drive man to kill his fellow man, to imprison and torture him,’ says Robert Storr, director of the 52nd Venice Biennale. ‘These horrors are also visible in the mirror that art holds up to the world, though reality’s ugliness might be transformed into a terrible beauty, or crystallized into a prism through which we can examine the flaws that produce it.’

Storr says he did not set out to produce a politically themed Biennale, but this is certainly the most political (and politically correct) exhibition in recent history. Subtitled ‘Think with the Senses, Feel with the Mind - Art in the Present Tense’, the Biennale is a massive undertaking spread out over 77 national pavilions (the most ever), the Arsenale and numerous collateral shows in museums and grand palaces. [...]

THE SHADES OF COINCIDENCE

As always with any multi-layered art undertaking, certain strategies or similarities between different artists emerge. Mirrored labyrinths in different styles reappear throughout - Eric Duyckaerts’ mirror maze in the Belgian pavilion; the repellent and bloodthirsty giant laying in a forest of mirrors in the Canadian pavilion by David; and the astronauts, stuffed toys and devilish masks multiplied in reflective surfaces in the German pavilion by Isa Genzken. Maybe this was a response to the mirror as a memento mori. Birds popped up everywhere, including in Sophie Calle’s French pavilion, where a cockatoo is shown ripping apart and eating a break-up letter, the ultimate comment on feminist literature. Painting is thin on the ground, though the new, spare works by of Ellsworth Kelly, Sigmar Polke, Gerhard Richter and Robert Ryman in the central pavilion create a strong quartet.

Unlike in previous editions of the Venice Biennale, this event proposed very few inter-active artworks, although you were encouraged to throw darts by Sweden’s Jacob Dahlgren.



Rafael Lozano-Hemmer, model for Wave Function, at the Palazzo Soranzo Ven Axel, the first ever official Mexican pavilion at the Venice Biennale. His installation consists of a collection of Eames swivel chairs with motorized bases, so that when a viewer walks past, the chairs raise up electronically, like a Mexican wave.

Only at the Mexican pavilion in the Palazzo Soranzo Van Axel, did Rafael Lozano-Lemmer really utilise the spectator as a fundamental component to complete his work. His work is based on the appropriation of robotics and surveillance technology, incorporating the viewer in his large scale light-and-shadow installations. Thanks to sensors, a large eye on a screen follows you around one room, inducing paranoia like the revenge of the Mona Lisa. White plastic chairs lift and move according to the path of the visitor. In another work, the viewer’s heartbeat is measured, and then transferred to create a pulsating chandelier of electric light bulbs. [...]

The 52nd International Art Exhibition has attracted over 103,000 visitors in two months (from June 10th to August 8th), and is the most visited of all currently open art exhibitions in Italy.