



la Biennale di Venezia

54. Esposizione
Internazionale
d'Arte

la Biennale di Venezia

54th International Art Exhibition

ILLUMInazioni – ILLUMInations

Introduction by Paolo Baratta, President of la Biennale di Venezia

La Biennale is like a wind machine

La Biennale is like a wind machine. Every two years 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 (and this year the trunks really will be ancient, given the curator's intention of opening with Tintoretto). La Biennale is a grand pilgrimage where the voices of the world that speak to us of their and our future come together in the artists' creations and the curators' work.

Art is here intended as an activity in constant evolution.

If a museum is mainly qualified by the works it houses (although not only, given that museum directors are now expected to also be managers and impresarios), then an institution like La Biennale is qualified rather by its *modus operandi*, by the methods used, by the nature of the subjects that take part in it, by the choice of method and the principles and rules that inspire its organization, by the spaces it has available, etc.; in short, by the Form of the Institution that is reflected in the Form given to the Exhibition held every two years. And it is on the quality of this Form that achieving our main objective depends: obtaining the respect of the world.

After 116 years, the form of the current exhibition is that defined in 1999 and confirmed and perfected over the subsequent years. I say this because it was precisely in that year that the Exhibition held in the pavilions was clearly and distinctly joined by the Exhibition organized as an international event by La Biennale's nominated curator, who has a precise function in not having to take charge of the selection in the Italian Pavilion.

La Biennale is therefore now based on the following pillars.

1) **First pillar: the Pavilions of the Participating Countries.**

There are **28 permanent pavilions** inside the Giardini used by **30 owner countries**, who are considered permanent participants. But other countries that ask to be invited to the Exhibition are equal participants; of these some find space in the Arsenale, others in various places around Venice. The Participating Countries this year, confirmed up to now, number **89** (there were 77 at the last Biennale). Among these, those taking part for the first time are: Principality of Andorra, Saudi Arabia, People's Republic of Bangladesh and Haiti (present in 2007 with IILA). Others have returned after earlier participation: India (1982), Democratic Republic of Congo (1968), Iraq (1990), Republic of Zimbabwe (1990), South Africa (1995), Costa Rica (1993, then with IILA) and Cuba (1995, then with IILA). I recall

that for every Biennale the state administrations that manage the pavilions (or the administrations to which the states have entrusted such management) nominate a commissioner and a curator. In the autumn before the Exhibition a general meeting is held at which the curator nominated by La Biennale explains the directions of the plan for “his” International Exhibition. This is solely informative; the curators of the various countries are not bound and can freely make their own decisions. The individual national pavilions are a very important feature of the Venice Biennale.

It is an old formula and yet one that is more vital than ever. It is precious in times of globalization, because it gives us the primary fabric of reference on which the always new, always varied, autonomous geographies of the artists can be observed and better highlighted. It may be asked to what extent these pavilions also bring with them desires for representation of the country that organises them—although the autonomy left to the curators is broad. Each one has its own history and style. It may certainly be said that in them the countries reveal the role attributed to contemporary art as messenger of their present and their cultural wealth. But the pavilions also provide revelations on more profound realities and riches than those of the usual official and stereotyped images or pretexts.

2) Second pillar: La Biennale curator’s International Exhibition.

At the center, alongside the national pavilions, is the International Exhibition of the curator, this year Bice Curiger, who has chosen ILLUMInations as her title (83 artists will be featured). The curator is specifically requested to create an exhibition “without borders.” La Biennale has not nominated committees or commissions, nor different curators for different areas, but relies on the individual responsibility of a curator (assisted by advisors and, for the staging, La Biennale organization). Between the choices of the national pavilion curators and those of La Biennale curator, between the curator’s International Exhibition and the pavilions’ International Exhibition, shared choices or different choices are freely determined. The dialectic relation between these choices is a qualifying element of its international nature—an exhibition with many eyes, with many points of view.

3) Third pillar: the spaces for holding La Biennale curator’s big International Exhibition.

They had to be suited to purpose. And precisely for this reason, in 1998 we significantly expanded the spaces that now consist of the Palazzo delle Esposizioni in the Giardini on one hand, and the Arsenale on the other. The spaces are an essential element of the Exhibition, which finds in them and in their particular articulation and quality the most suitable tool for forming its own language. It is worth remembering that since we created these spaces and clarified the new layout of the Exhibition, the number of countries asking to take part in La Biennale has increased. There were 61 in 1999, now there are 89. In recent years the new Italian Pavilion has been created and then much enlarged at the Arsenale, entrusted this year to Professor Vittorio Sgarbi, nominated curator by the Italian Ministry of Culture.

4) A further component: the Collateral Events.

Non-profit organizations can present projects for small exhibitions to be held in Venice, normally for all six months of the Exhibition. La Biennale curator, here too in complete autonomy, decides on their quality and possibly admittance as “collateral” events. Those admitted can use La Biennale logo, are included in a special section of the catalogue and are publicised by La Biennale. Organizations capable of expressing a quality choice are in this way offered a means of participating. In some cases the opportunity has been taken up by ethnic minorities who choose the Biennale Arte to make their presence felt and to demonstrate their cultural identity. We have always given great importance to this (83 requests were presented this year, the curator’s selection admits about half).

5) A decisive element: the city of Venice, which for six months welcomes this great mass of vital Energy.

6) An increasingly important pillar of our construction is then our care of the public.

La Biennale has for some time been developing educational activities and guided visits. These are conducted with a growing number of schools in the region. But this year we have opened up a new sphere of action. After the favourable experience at the Architecture Exhibition, La **Biennale Sessions** programme is now being launched for the first time. It is intended for institutions working in research and training in the arts or related fields: universities, fine arts academies and training and research institutes. The aim is to facilitate three day visits organized by them for groups of at least 50 students and teachers, with specially priced meals, the possibility of organizing seminars in venues offered free and assistance with the organization of travel and accommodation. We would like these institutions to consider the Biennale Arte a place in which to hold a session, albeit brief, of their work for students, researchers and teachers. I have already sent more than 2000 letters to institutions around the world and we await the replies. Open seminars will then also be held during the exhibition. **Meetings on Art** will be organized in June and at the autumn resumption. This pillar is intended to confirm the Venice Biennale's role as an institution open to knowledge and the spirit of research, worthy of a pilgrimage.

I mentioned the importance of the curator's role and the responsibility invested in him (her). The curator must have an open eye, an independent spirit, generosity towards the artists, a strict capacity for selection and great faith in that mysterious goddess quality. An open view of the world. The world recognises these qualities in Bice Curiger. With her we have gone back to Zurich. We began with Harald Szeemann, in 1999. Some friends describe these twelve years of La Biennale as "the happy journey from Harald's beard to the cherry red of Bice's lipstick."

How far has art come in the meantime, from the need to burst into society to its widespread and almost rampant diffusion! How different the responsibilities of the curator! We agree with Bice. At a time when art has for some time ceased its emphasis on the provocations of anti-art, we are looking for means of communication between the artist's work, our look and our spirit; we want to understand and to feel that added extra that art generously gives us and whispers to us, we want illumination as visitors, as lovers of art, as individuals and as members of the human community. And let Illumination be!

The organization of an exhibition with the characteristics and dimensions of ours is the result of the effort and commitment, the energy and intelligence of numerous people, dedicated in various ways and forms to its creation.

A heartfelt thanks to the various Participating Countries, the commissioners and the curators who enrich the Exhibition with their contribution and point of view, and a particular welcome to the countries taking part for the first time and those returning after many years. A special thanks to the offices and all those who work at La Biennale and are differently employed with their recognized professionalism and enthusiasm in organizing the Exhibition.

My thanks to the Ministry of Culture, which at a difficult time for public finances is maintaining its decisive support, the local institutions that in various ways support La Biennale, the City of Venice and the Regione del Veneto. We extend our thanks to the authorities that are in various ways involved and concerned with the buildings in which we hold our Exhibition, from the Ministry of Defence to the Venice Soprintendenze. A particular word of gratitude to the Soprintendenza Speciale per il Polo Museale della città di Venezia and to the Benedictine fathers of the monastery of San Giorgio Maggiore for having agreed to the request to exhibit the three works by Tintoretto.

Thanks to the sponsors who have maintained their decisive contribution, to the various foundations that have indirectly contributed with a spirit of patronage and in particular to the LUMA Foundation for its support in the creation of the Para-Pavilions; to all those who in various ways have contributed to the accomplishment of the individual participations, and to all the visitors our warmest welcome!