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KILLER TEXT ON ART

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PROVINCIAL POLEMICS, U.S. PREDICTABILITY,
ITALIAN NIHILISM MAKE FRAGMENTED BIENNALE

BY JOHN DAVID O'BRIEN

THE VENICE BIENNALE IS ALWAYS fantastic to see because, well, it's in Venice, a city of wonders, and also because it always provides us with the chance to formulate polemical considerations about the art world or, should we say, the many coexisting worlds of art.

This year the Biennale mirrored the world in that there was a lot of politics, manifesto-like declarations and conflicting purposes on view. Whether you were entering the nearly empty, flooded, boarded-up Greek Pavilion bearing the simple graffiti tag of "Sold-Out" or were enticed into vanishing forevermore into the rather pointless labyrinthine set of chambers built into the British Pavilion or even cajoled into studying the convoluted symbols and self-inflicted wounds of the artist in the Serbian Pavilion, a lot of turmoil and anger was on view. The main problem for international viewers was the improbability that they would be sufficiently informed of the specifics of each country's political issues to ferret out the meaning of the works. So, what was left in the place of understanding was a plain and inscrutable concept piece, with little or no visual pleasure to add to the experience. Aside from the question of repetitiveness, it wasn't a very interesting perspective.

The American Pavilion, with the duo of Allora & Calzadilla, also dove into the arena of political concept art this year with a cold and maniacally mechanical set of works, collectively titled "Gloria." The artworks consisted of a real upside-down M-15 tank outfitted with a treadmill, a pair of fabricated wooden business class airplane seats used as gym

equipment and a functioning ATM machine embedded in a pipe organ set to play as money was distributed. Gymnasts wearing U.S. Olympic outfits regularly activated the apparatus. The parallel between economic, athletic and military muscle was obvious and, aside from the noise made by the tank treads and the ATM organ, extremely predictable. Finally, we were given the concept artist as art director, without much emotional involvement or depth reading: preaching to the already converted.

The only interesting part of "Gloria" was *Flagging*, a video in which young men in two projections, situated one above the other, haul themselves up perpendicularly to a pole creating a half- and full-mast impromptu human flag. That this performance was set on an island devastated by U.S. military testing was a compelling addition to an already interesting work. The worst part of "Gloria" was a scale model of the Statue of Liberty reclining in a functioning tanning bed. This thin concept project might have been acceptable for a grad school candidate with an oversized budget, but in the entryway of the U.S. Pavilion it seemed downright sophomoric.

The best work in the Giardini venue was the Christian Boltanski installation at the French Pavilion. Outfitted with a massive set of intersecting construction poles and gangplanks, the entire pavilion was turned into a gigantic slot machine, with continuous rubber strips racing up and down and all around the space. The strips contained Boltanski's characteristic images of haunting facial portraits; as they whirled throughout the pavilion, a cen-

tral monitor reconstructed faces like those little book puzzles where different parts of various heads are collaged high speed into a new face. Far up in one side pavilion was a LED readout displaying the number of people dying at that moment, and on the opposing side the number of people being born. The extended metaphor created by the work gave a visitor cause to mull about a number of issues: the population of our teeming planet, the anonymity of the post-industrial age, the dispersal and loss of life — all of these ruminations kindled by a marvelously fascinating visual artwork.

The other part of the Biennale deserving some recognition and comment was Vittorio Sgarbi's Italian Pavilion. This flamboyant and controversial political and cultural figure tossed a massive wrench into the seriousness and historical gravitas of the Biennale by declaring that since no new tendencies or currents were brewing in the art world he'd simply ask others whose taste and acumen he trusted to indicate some representative artists from their region. The result was a kind of open-air market with a huge and cacophonous array of artworks hanging floor to ceiling sans connective tissue of form, theme or content.

Besides taking democracy and capitalism to a logical end and unsettling the way Biennales tend to reinforce or establish markets, Sgarbi was also able to single-handedly nullify the distinction that once accompanied selection to a Venice Biennale. Whether this madcap salon was a good or a bad way to curate the 2011 Biennale, Sgarbi left to the viewer's discretion. The



critics hated it, but what is a Venice Biennale without a lively polemic? ☹

Above: Allora & Calzadilla, *Track and Field*, 2011. U.S. Pavilion, 54th International Art Exhibition, presented by the Indianapolis Museum of Art; Photos by Tascha Horowitz and Andrew Bordwin.



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