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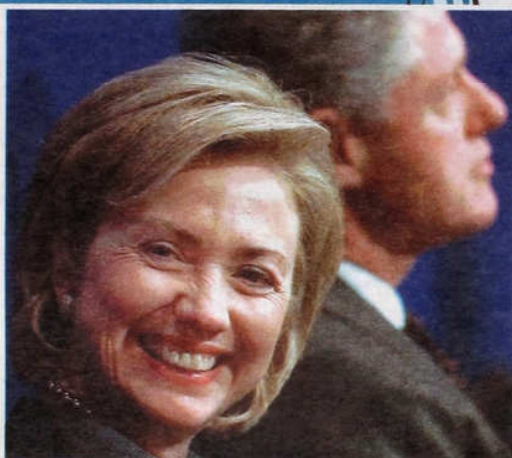
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Cover photograph of Cate Blanchett by Greg Williams

Art

It's still the world's best art event, but the Venice Biennale is turning into a monster — and its curators are getting too big for their boots. WALDEMAR JANUSZCZAK reports

A Venetian bind

The 50th Venice Biennale has arrived. Whoopee. This is still the most spectacular and significant art event on the planet, and in order to keep appearing, biennially, for 100 years, it has had to survive a scary assortment of trying circumstances, including two world wars. That's worth applauding. Unfortunately, the great beast has made a noticeable effort to celebrate its 50th unveiling by growing even bigger and packing itself with still more stuff. When I left, Venice was still afloat. But I don't know for how long.

What a rapid growth industry contemporary art has become. It is entirely impossible for me to describe this biennale to you adequately. It has too many things going on in it, too many corners, too many countries, showing too many artists. Using the broadest of brushes, I can indicate to you that it consists of three main sections. At the centre of the action, as always, are the international pavilions showing representative artists. Then there is the biennale fringe, a littering of smaller exhibitions all over the city, in which various types from various places with various ambitions make DIY contributions to the chaos. Finally, there is an ambitious backbone of official shows that attempts to make sense of these madcap international proceedings by setting the official biennale theme.

This, of course, cannot actually be done. Giving the Venice Biennale a theme is like trying to lasso a charging elephant with a hoop of sewing thread. But every two years someone is persuaded to have a go, and this year it has fallen to a verbose Italian critic called Francesco Bonami to attempt the Herculean feat. Bonami has come up with *Dreams and Conflicts: The Dictatorship of the Viewer*, an unusually unhelpful governing idea that has nothing discernible to do with anything on display. How can we

viewers of the 50th biennale ever be accused of dictatorship when it is Bonami and his cronies who have selected what we are viewing? I think it must have been a slip of the pen. What he actually meant to call his show was *The Dictatorship of the Curator*.

This is the first biennale I have visited in which the ideas of curators have been given a bigger platform than the ideas of artists. It's like going to a boxing match at which the managers are in the ring instead of the pugilists. Bonami has selected a few displays himself. But he also has working for him a team of 10 other curators, and these 10 oversee lots of lesser curators. So ridiculous is this greedy accumulation of curatorial presences that the biennale's most annoying show, *Utopia Station* — a squatter's settlement of sheds and peeling prefabs plastered with posters and texts — is the handiwork of no less than 18 upper and lower curators. Rarely can a management class have multiplied at such a crazed rate. It's like something out of *Animal Farm*.

Most of the overcurated official theme shows are housed in the *Arsenale*, the old Venetian naval yards, where the warehouses have been converted into kilometre after kilometre of gloomy exhibition space. But what is really telling is that all these different curatorial minds arrive, every time, at more or less the same show: a nocturnal blur of text messages, video effects, projection pieces and cryptic installations, all throbbing with the same unhealthy electronic pulse. Each curator writes a text. Each text is a messy sprawl of sociocultural vagaries quoting Derrida and Foucault. Thus, the international art world has entered cyberspace with the same shared sense of purpose that characterises the behaviour of lemmings.

The Goebbels figure to Bonami's Führer in this grim dictatorship of the curators is Catherine David, a French

megabore who gives us a particularly joyless display called *Contemporary Arab Representations*, a gathering so full of tracts that it hasn't actually got any art in it. At least none that is immediately apparent to the human eye. Thus the simplest of all truths about art has been suppressed here, which is that a picture is worth a thousand words. When you get Catherine David and her kind, you get the 1,000 words, and more. But no pictures.

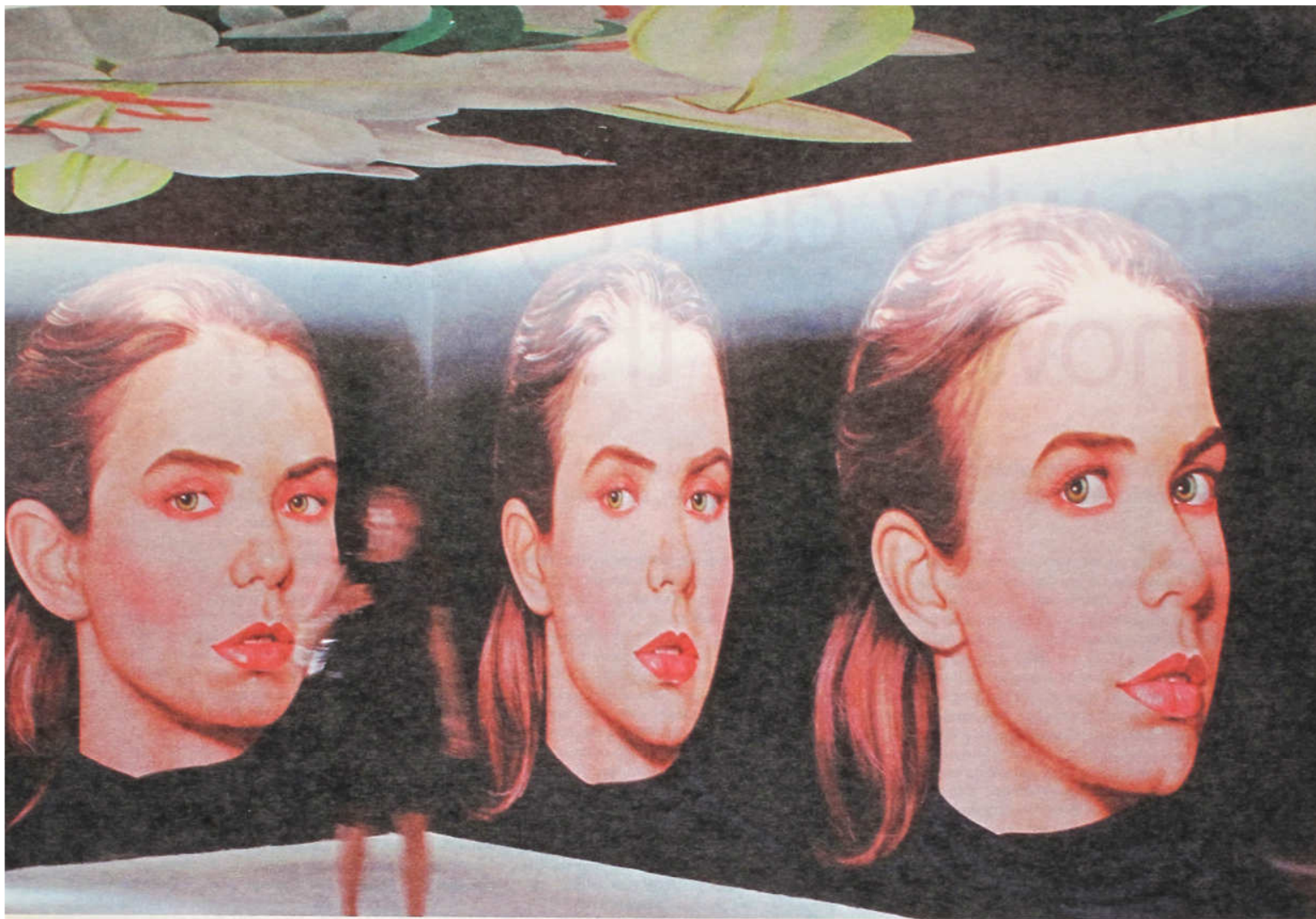
It takes strong art to survive this semantic trial by middlemen. And I am proud to notice that our man in Venice, Chris Ofili, does that. If only just. The British pavilion, a converted tearoom in the main biennale gardens, isn't naturally suited to Ofili's atmospheres. He's black. It's white. He's anticolonial. It manages to preserve a perfect colonial formality. He's hip-hop. It most certainly isn't. But he's been invited in, and with lashings of red, green and black paint, he manages to turn the place into a nightclub of lurve from, I would say, the Shaft era.

On these brightly coloured walls is a suite of new paintings featuring Ofili's usual pair of black lovers with afros canoodling in the jungle. They're very beautiful, and it's brave of Ofili to redecorate the British pavilion with this much ambition. But with so many colour sensations jostling for attention simultaneously, I found it physically difficult to focus on his paintings. I blinked and blinked, but it didn't help. Sure, I get the symbolism of the omnipresent red, green and black, and know these to be the colours of Marcus Garvey's flag of African unity, but Garvey wasn't into optics, and when it comes to choosing the best colours to paint the walls of a gallery, he's a lousy mentor.

This is a highly political biennale. A huge amount of Brit- and Yank-bashing goes on in *Utopia Station*, and there's much enthusiastic damning of the Iraq war in the minor

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pavilions. But, interestingly, among the pariahs, American artists are obviously deemed to be more acceptable than British ones. The British presence in the biennale's official theme shows is feeble to the point of invisibility. Almost everywhere you look, we get nul points. American artists, however, provide Bonami's central exhibition, a vigorous mess called *Delays and Revolutions*, with some of its best moments.

Chief among these are Richard Prince's eerie photographs of cowboys on horses, inspired by the iconic image of the Marlboro Man. There are about 20 of these action shots, full of dust and rawhide, and they seem to swirl around you, as if you are in the middle of a merry-go-round. Before the

tobacco companies got their claws into him, Marlboro Man sure was a beautiful and thrilling sight.

If the deliberate exclusion of the Brits is one of this biennale's minor themes, an important one is the fetching up in Venice of huge numbers of artists from the Middle and Far East. Catherine David's numbingly boring survey of Contemporary Arab Representations achieves the biennale's least useful contribution to this emergence, but, more interestingly, all over the many shows, you can witness powerful eastern energies arriving at the aesthetic front line. My guess is that most of them found their way there via the internet, which is why its hums and glows have soaked into so much of their art.

When I'd done my traipsing through the biennale gardens, I made my usual keen journey to the old prisons of Venice, near San Marco, where the Taiwan pavilion has once again thrown open its cell doors. The Taiwanese have played a crucial role in recent Biennale history. By taking over this dramatic prison outpost a decade ago, they signalled an important shift away from the official gardens, where Old Europe still dominates, to an altogether livelier alternative

Head girl: a piece by Iran's Shirana Shahbazi

internationalism. They were also the first exhibitors to appear genuinely at ease in the computer-generated cyberworld in which so much contemporary international art is now set. They're at it again here, as excellently as ever, with a giant pair of digitally altered photographs, by Yuan Goang-ming, of a city's daytime compared with its night-time. In the day, it looks dead. But at night the neon comes on and it springs into spectacular cyberlife. This, palpably, is the future.

But I'm ashamed to admit that the show that gave me most pleasure was proudly unserious, full of vulgarity and unarguably corrupt. It was organised by the people who make Absolut vodka, and consisted entirely of wacky advertisements for the stuff thought up by artists. Thus Wim Delvoye and Delphine, a pair of Belgians, came up with a papier-mâché Elton John who pees spent Absolut into a beer glass as he breaks wind melodically. Heaven knows what this giant off-licence was doing in the biennale, but I spent two hours in there and every minute was fun. □

The Venice Biennale continues until November 2

WWW
www.labiennale.org/en
English-language site for the great Italian art exhibition



Venice peaches: from left, works by Yuan Goang-ming (Taiwan); Wim Delvoye and Delphine (Belgium); Oleg Kulik (Russia); Fred Wilson (USA); Carsten Holler (Belgium); and Britain's Chris Offill