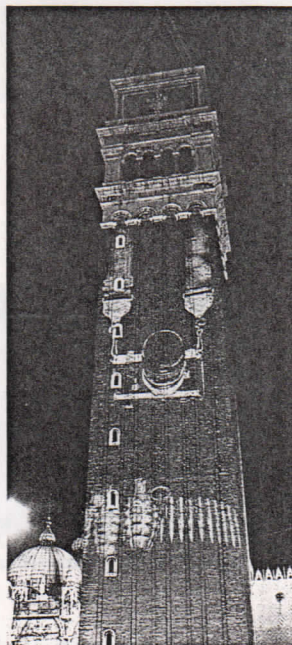


Ferrante imperato *Historia Naturale* 1672



Krzysztof Wodiczko
Projection 1986

Mysteries & Mercenaries THE VENICE BIENNALE 1986 MICHAEL NEWMAN

"Today, mercenary pirates of political terrorism are threatening to cut off the commercial routes of tourism's global empire, of which Venice is a strategic centre. To secure this empire's operations, in particular its overseas summer crusades, the imperial jumbo jet fleet demands military protection. Thus the contemporary fear of terrorism joins with the fear of the entire empire of tourism, finding its centre today in Venice, whose embattled history and architectural memory are haunted by it already."

This could be the scenario for a science fiction thriller. All it needs is a superhero to save the world for tourism. Today the line between fiction and fact is blurred. On the day of the reception held at the Peggy Guggenheim collection to celebrate the opening of an exhibition of sculpture by Noguchi at the American pavilion, two US Navy troop carriers parked themselves off the Riva degli Schiavoni beside the Piazza San Marco where the night before Krzysztof Wodiczko – author of the above statement – had projected slides of tank-tracks, a cartridge belt with hand grenades and a tourist's camera onto the Campanile.

This year's Biennale was notable for the absence of the young New York neo-modernist abstractionists who are "hot" in the market at the moment. Not only were there few American tourists and collectors around, but there also seemed to be a deep divide between the interests and preoccupations of European and American art. European work

is continuing to tend towards the poetic and the enigmatic, slowing down reception and blocking any straightforward interpretation. This desire to achieve a slower experience in art can be understood in the context of the massive explosion of information and communications technology over the past few years.

This explosion was uncritically celebrated, probably as a result of the power of sponsorship, by the official theme exhibition of the Biennale, "Art and Science." There were sections on "Space," "Art and Biology," "Colour," "Technology and Information," "Science for Art" (the use of technology in art history and restoration at the Accademia), a *Wunderkammer*, and the main exhibition, "Art and Alchemy," curated by Arturo Schwartz. The latter was vague and unhistorical: pretty well anything could have been included under its categories, and was. Important examples of twentieth-century European art were joined by some good and not so good recent and contemporary works (Andre, Paolini, Boetti, Cucchi, James Lee Byars, Wilding, Gormley, Bainbridge, Haring, Scharf and others). Unfortunately the exhibition was padded out with a good deal of third-rate surrealist schlock. Needless to say, the installation was still being put together during the press opening – I saw a wonderful Cornell box lying unattended on the floor. The best part of this section was the display of illustrated manuscripts and books,

which was curated by Mino Gabriele – androgynes, copulating angels, snakes and dragons. (Surprisingly, Clemente wasn't included in this show.)

The most important question in the relationship between art and science – the question of the historical determination of subjectivity – was never raised. For Heidegger, the moment when the world becomes a picture is the same as the moment when man becomes a subject in the midst of "that which is." This could well have been a theme – but wasn't – for the "Space" section, which included a reconstruction of Brunelleschi's perspective experiment and a full-scale wooden model of the Palazzo Spada perspective in Rome by Borromini, as well as a number of catoptric anamorphoses. In an essay on "Rationality," the philosopher, Charles Taylor, describes the modern scientific revolution as a breaking of the connection between understanding and "attunement." (From *Rationality and Relativism* Eds. Hollis and Lukes, 1982.) The renaissance sage and alchemist was concerned with both, whereas the scientist is only concerned with the former. The surrealist emphasis of "Art and Science" led it towards the psychodramatic rather than the historical. The revival of surrealist imagery in recent painting involves an apprehension that subjectivity has become a problem. But this needs to be understood in terms of changing representations, not as a historical essence. The current "poetic" European art is not expressionist or surrealist in the sense in which these were understood up to the 1950s – the *frisson* of Surrealist art is that of a nineteenth-century private subjectivity confronted by the fragmentation and shocks of modernity. The kinds of boundaries and distinctions upon which this subjectivity depends, between inside and outside, determinant and determined, have broken down today.

Aperto '86: analytic reverie

In the Biennale catalogue a number of the eleven selectors of "Aperto" identify a move away from "wild" painting, towards a more analytical approach. Stephen Schmidt-Wulffen writes of a "neo-conceptualism" and Lynne Cooke of "an engagement with the legacy of conceptual art" and the hall mark of new art being "analytical reverie." I would see this art, which is not so much one of theoretical concepts as of metaphorical conceits, as an attempt to

reinvent an expressive practice, only without the expressionist subject. Conceptual art, and the legacy of Duchamp and Picabia as well, must be taken into account insofar as they dealt the death-blow to the expressionist subjectivity which was a legacy of nineteenth-century Romanticism. A lucid and critically coherent exhibition on this theme would have been very valuable at this time, and this is perhaps the exhibition struggling to emerge from the selection of Cooke, Schmidt-Wulffen, Heidi Grundmann and Thomas Sokolowski – at least judging by their statements. However, the over-large committee, and the tensions between theme and national interests, have prevented this. As it is, "Aperto" is strong in parts but badly incoherent; it is let down by the Italian selection, which is mainly nebulous, sub-Abstract Expressionist painting. In this kind of exhibition, which is already bewildering to the viewer, work with a sharpness of conception and execution looks best, so the current shift towards more conceptual and hard-edge modes may well be a pragmatic move. I hope it is not just that, as there are important issues involved.

Talk of "neo-conceptualism" involves assumptions concerning the definition of conceptual art, the history of which has hardly begun to be written. What might emerge from such a history is – to put it crudely – a broad distinction between analytic and poetic/metaphorical approaches (which could be measured by the distance between, say, Joseph Kosuth and Giulio Paolini). The usefulness of exhibitions like "Aperto '86" and "Falls the Shadow," at the Hayward Gallery this summer, is that they allow us to perceive the latter as a distinct category, and in time to come to make some kind of critical evaluation of the complexity of conceptual art.

The act of making art today seems to involve rupture and appropriation, regardless of whether it is a matter of media imagery or the art of the past. The image is torn from context and continuity, and represented within a space which uses abstraction as a form of appropriation, rather like the museum itself. This space is either within the work, as an abstract field, or is the space of the gallery itself. Art is the arena not so much for the action of the subject as its extinction, what Lacan calls the "fading" which occurs as the fantasized object of desire is



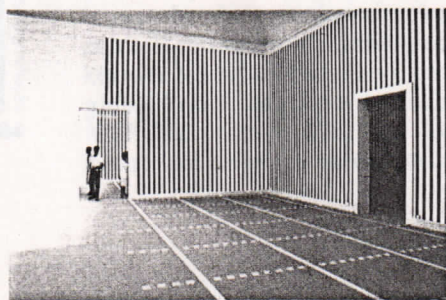
German pavilion: Sigmar Polke (detail)

approached. These remarks apply to many of the works in "Aperto," including those by Shelagh Alexander, John Murphy, Avis Newman, Lisa Milroy, Mark Tansey, René Santos, Sarah Charlesworth and Boyd Webb, among others.

These days any works of art which look like architecture or furniture immediately attract attention. Among the most talked about works in "Aperto" – in the absence from the Biennale of the heavily promoted Germans, Mucha, Klingelhöller and Schütte – were *Madness in Two* by the Dutch artist, Niek Kemps, a funereal black wood and velvet structure carrying an inscription of the names of architectural buildings and locations, and a work in three parts by the Belgian artist Jan Vercruyse, *Atopies*. This consisted of two rectangular panels each two metres high by one metre wide, one hung on the wall and the other leaning beside a wooden fireplace. Functioning as both picture and literal objects, *Atopies* constituted a "still life" which conveyed the inertia of the bourgeois interior. The stasis of atopia has replaced the utopian dynamism of Modernism.

Daniel Buren: Classicism

"Perhaps the only thing one can do after having seen a canvas like ours is total revolution" Daniel Buren said of the PMPT group in 1967. Now, having



French pavilion: Daniel Buren (detail)

just completed a huge permanent site-sculpture at the Palais Royale in Paris, he is representing France at the Biennale. His modifications to the French pavilion were superbly elegant, and deservedly won the best pavilion prize. Of course he used his characteristic stripes throughout: yellow awning, blue stripes, black stripes, strips of mirror, and – best of all – cutting away the plaster of the walls to the brick, making plaster/brick stripes. The range is from mirrors at the entrance, which reflect what is outside the building, to finally cutting away to the brick and revealing the material of the building itself. The effect of differences between spaces brought out the building's classical symmetry, creating beautiful vistas and enhancing the effect of light and spaciousness. (The emptiness of the space made it seem as if the visitors were the exhibit.)

Sigmar Polke: a mineral sublime

Polke is another *enfant terrible* turned state artist. He shared the revived Golden Lion award for best artist with Auerbach. A slightly pathetic vestige of his radicalism were the paintings from enlarged screened photos hung outside and just inside the pavilion, one of a pig with a policeman's hat. The doors of the German pavilion remained firmly shut to all comers until the afternoon of the last day of the press openings. They finally opened to a large crowd, upon whom Polke sprinkled gold leaf from the walkway above: symbolizing the artist as both god and trickster.

The delay was presumably so that Polke could paint the far, concave wall of the main room in an airy blue wash like a Turner backdrop, spangled with silver leaf. A meteorite was placed on the floor before it, and in a side room was a large quartz crystal. A series of tall, gaseous yellow caramelized lacquer paintings were leaned against the two side walls. The other main series of paintings featured cloudy grey wash overlaid with a calligraphic black line, simultaneously Chinese and gothic in effect. The initial impact of the installation is light, atmospheric and spectacular – a mineral sublime – although individually the paintings do not reward close attention. If Polke's installation alludes to nature, it is not so much the Romantic nature of organism and growth as an inhuman nature of minerals, rocks and vast spaces. There is a feeling of absence and emptiness, as if not only the artist, but humanity itself, had left the stage.

Frank Auerbach: the rhetoric of authenticity

A lot of people are saying that Frank Auerbach is the greatest artist in Britain, if not the world. He has become something of a figurehead for humanist authenticity and high seriousness. The problem I have with his paintings is that they look so much like great paintings ought to look that I find it difficult to get past their decorum. The thick paint, the sombre dark green and browns of the portraits, enlivened by the odd flash of red and yellow, the combination of traditional genres and recognizable subjects with modernist deformation and abstraction, all allow the work to combine the evident seriousness of high, angst-ridden art with upper middle class social acceptability. The constituency for Auerbach's work is much the same as that for previous British representatives, Barry Flanagan and Howard Hodgkin. Instead of Hodgkin's pale green the walls of the pavilion were dark grey this year. The feeling that Auerbach's paintings and drawings transcend artworld fashion, and, indeed, historical change altogether, while at the same time affirming the continuity of tradition, is very appealing. As is their no-nonsense empiricism: the paintings are of models identified by names or initials and of particular townscapes, and the paint-substance asserts itself as fact. At the same time there is the struggle to transcend brute substance and win a victory over the death which it represents. It is this which lends the work its pathos.

Imants Tillers: antipodean appropriation

Imants Tillers, representing Australia, is the opposite kind of painter to Auerbach, and exemplifies the concerns



Frank Auerbach *Head of Y.J.Y.M.* 1984

MARLBOROUGH



Imants Tillers *The Hyperborean and the Speluncar* 1986

of his (and my) generation. Where Auerbach stands for expressive authenticity, the artist as origin of the work, the uniqueness of touch, the artwork as a formal unity and a subjective response to a model in the external world, Tillers questions all these things. Not only does he repaint the paintings of others, he uses reproductions as his model. *Psychic (for Yves Klein)* combines images from ads illustrating works by Julian Schnabel and Sandro Chia; *The Hyperborean and the Speluncar* marries late, de Chirico with Lord Leighton (with a work by a New Zealand artist emerging through); *Lost, Lost, Lost* places a Kiefer forest beside the Dokoupil and Dahn parody of it. Contemporary art becomes an echoing forest of analogies, signifiers of signifiers.

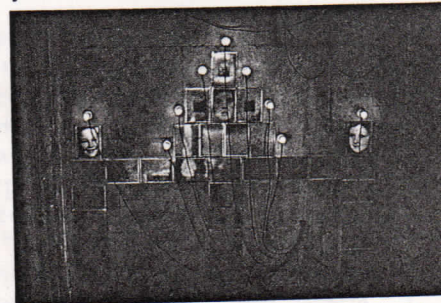
This kind of appropriation has been a fairly commonplace strategy over the past few years, but Tillers gives it an interesting twist both semantically and technically. Technically in that the large paintings are done on very many small canvas boards. On a practical level this allows for storage in stacks and easy shipping; it also serves to fragment the unity of the image into a jigsaw-like reconstruction. The consistency of gesture of the "authentic" subject is broken down by the "difference within repetition" borrowed from Minimalism (a section of *I am the Door*, which is a repainting of a reproduction of Polke's *Paganini* of 1982, is metallic, to allude to Carl Andre's floor pieces). The units of the grid are by definition interchangeable, so that any particular ordering represents a reinvestment of desire in the "dead" image on the part of artist and viewer. The semantic twist is that Tillers represents appropriation as the second-handness of provincial culture. It may be the case that the Australian cultural condition of mimicry of what is known to be second-hand presages a global future, like the wastelands of the *Mad Max* films. With the loss of a centre, we are all provincial today.

Christian Boltanski: mourning childhood

Christian Boltanski's installation *Leçons de Ténèbres* ("Lessons of Shadows") at the Palazzo delle Prigioni consisted of dozens of black and white photographs of the faces of children, closely cropped and roughly framed in tin, arrayed all around the dark stone walls. Above each was a low-power light bulb with a black cord trailing away to a power point. These provided almost the only illumination in the room. Rising up from the floor against the walls were five "shrines" made from panels of turquoise and ochre photographs of Christmas paper. Each was topped by photographs of the boys and girls, and above each of these was a further panel containing a small photograph of flowers. These configurations, reminiscent of the use of portrait photographs as mementos in Catholic graveyards, were illuminated with lights arranged to form a pyramidal Christmas tree pattern. A small room led off from this chapel-like space to reveal another "shrine" with a single picture of a child. In the centre of this space a projector directed a beam of light at a diminutive silhouette of a flying figure with two birds' feathers attached to its back. As the disk revolved, the shadow of a malevolent-looking flying creature was projected undulating around the wall. Like an angel of death it approached the picture of the child, brushing against it.

This tender installation, which drew on the historical memory of its location turning it into a sacred place, invoked an act of collective anamnesis, the remembrance of an archetype of childhood, in celebration and in mourning. Boltanski's work is also an affirmation of the possibilities of contemporary practice which is rich without being a *rappel à l'ordre*.

Michael Newman is the co-selector, together with Mark Francis, of "The Mirror and the Lamp" at the Fruitmarket Gallery, Edinburgh this summer and the ICA, London, in September. He is one of the judges of the year's Turner Prize.



Christian Boltanski *Leçons de Ténèbres* 1986 (detail)