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Cinema Arcade

The 49th Venice Biennial of Contemporary Art, entitled *Platea dell'Umanita (Plateau de l'Humanité or Plateau of Humankind)*, Venice. June 10 - Novembre 4 2001. Directed, as was the last, by the international Swiss curator Harold Szeemann

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Janet Cardiff & George Bures Miller, *The Paradise Institute*, 2001, Canadian Pavilion, 49th Venice Biennial.

ACTUALITÉS/EXPOSITIONS

Venice CINEMA ARCADE

The 49th Venice Biennial of Contemporary Art, entitled *Platea dell'Umanità* (*Plateau de l'Humanité* or *Plateau of Humankind*), Venice, June 10 – November 4 2001. Directed, as was the last, by the international Swiss curator Harold Szeemann.

In his curatorial statement, Harold Szeemann defines his choice of title *Platea dell'Umanità*: *It is not a theme but rather as a dimension. We don't wish to illustrate a style, a theme, but to offer a possible opening: to give connotation, to sustain freedom against barriers erected by styles, nationalities and nationalisms, by the idea of age limits... as if the age of an artist was a decisive factor for the youth of his work... To be intensities outside ideologies and stock exchange. L'imagination au pouvoir – to quote a motto from '68. To celebrate fragility again. (Biennial catalogue essay)*

The Venice Biennial has two main venues. The Giardini, a large wooded park, is the site of the national pavilions, each presenting the work of one or more of their artists. The Arsenal, a magnificent iron and wood beamed structure, majestically wide, tall and immensely long is just two canals to the west of the Giardini. It is this site and the enormous labyrinthian Italian Pavilion in the Giardini which are curated by Szeemann.

My choice of works for this introduction to the Biennial is not based on aesthetic ranking, but rather on an

overall sense of this year's event. The omnipresence of video works and their viewing rooms contributed to an underlying presence of film production. It, at times, gave this Biennial a sense of being a film festival for shorts presented in an arcade of scaled-down movie theatres. Such a proximity to the world of entertainment inserted an odd dimension within which to respond to the artworks presented.

I have chosen to start with the work of Pierre Huyghe, featured by the French Pavilion. It exemplified, for me, many aspects of this year's Biennial. Huyghe's works are an oddly jointed trilogy presented in three adjacent rooms separated by two large blocked doorways fitted with "Private-lite" glass. Operated by means of an electrical command system, the glass modulates between being opaque and transparent, permitting the spectator periodically to see across the adjacent exhibition rooms. The left room features *Les Grands Ensembles* (2001), a video in which two facing high-rise apartment buildings appear to be communicating with each other by a rudimentary binary system, with apartment lights turning on and off in some kind of mutual syncopa-

tion. Simulated atmospheric changes drift over and around the apartment towers nuancing this deadpan dialogue. Similarly, *Atari Light* (1999) in the central space involves sequentially illuminated ceiling tiles manipulated by viewers employing opposing joysticks in a play reminiscent of a first generation Atari video game. In the right-hand room, a strangely organic electronic tree of lights surrounded by a bench spreads its cables and lighting nodules at points along an electrical circuit. Depending on the power output generated by viewers sitting on the bench, the tree generates a build-up of electrical intensity that discharges light in a rhizome-like configuration. Projected on an opposing wall in this same room is the most recent episode of Huyghe's *One Million Kingdoms*, a work in progress titled *No Ghost Just a Shell* (2001) with its fictional manga character AnnLee. This six-minute animation has AnnLee walking endlessly through a moonscape topography of mountain-like computer 'spikes' generated by her own voice, a synthesized reproduction of the voice of Neil Armstrong landing on the moon.

These three staged architectural and virtual scenarios anthropomorphize its technology, casting the viewer implicated in its field as a character or player enmeshed in simulations of sense experience. We are caught, we realize, like AnnLee, always in a foreign country that is simply a continuous stream of developing states of sensation that come to define our ex-

istence. We occupy an immaterial, immutable, subtly ever-shifting non-place or state of mind. This dimension makes no claim to permanence, or, even in the traditional sense, critique. It is a place of observation, a place that constructs a field of intensities whose banal dimensions fuse with a sophisticated level of production value and corporate entertainment.

One of the most convincing, surprising and enduring sense experiences I had at the Biennial was George Bures Miller and Janet Cardiff's *The Paradise Institute* (2001) in the Canadian Pavilion. Escorted into a simple plywood shell in groups of sixteen, we were directed through opposing doors to take our places in two rows of old-fashioned movie theatre seats supplied with headphones. As though seated on an upper balcony, we found ourselves overlooking a miniature facsimile of a classic theatre complete with the screen glowing white far below us in the semi-darkness. With our headphones on and the doors closed, the movie began, a faux collage of a genre in which, you might say, Raymond Chandler meets Orson Wells. This fast-paced, TV Info-Spot appropriation of film noir offered a telling contrast to Ian Carr-Harris's more ironic and measured story-telling pace in his 1978 installation *Look*, which I had just recently seen at the Ydessa Hendeles Foundation in Toronto. It seemed in tune with a growing sense I had of the Biennial as a particular formation of spectacle. But to proceed with *The Paradise Institute*, Cardiff and



Pierre Huyghe, *Computer Game Program*, 1999. © Marian Goodman Gallery, Paris and New York.





Miller's now familiar use of binaural recording has the eerie effect of collapsing all experience into an intimate proximity in which actual and virtual are nearly inextricable. Coincident with the movie's opening narrative, we hear the sounds and voice of someone coming late to the *theatre*, sitting down and whispering: "I read about this film. It's based on a true story about the experiments the military did in the '50s...". This audio gesture instantly breaks the separation between object and subject set up by cinema, and the role of being the audience takes on an extended meaning. The narrative with its 1950's setting unfolds: a man lies drugged and restrained in a hospital bed; a young nurse ministering to him suddenly and violently caresses his body, to ironic commentary from the virtual audience within the headphones. Extreme close-ups and intercut narrative continue to induce tension: on screen, a shady, pockmarked doctor threatens the nurse against conspiring with the patient. Suddenly you hear his raspy breathing as he lowers his heavy body into the seat beside you and, in a seamless identification of yourself with the nurse, whispers a threat into your ear. This surprising manoeuvre so repulsively penetrates and invades one's private space that the reflexive actions of the body's physical sensations made me irresistibly recoil and move away from this phantom presence. While we are normally conscious of having our optical senses capable of deceiving us, in *The Paradise Institute*, audio virtuality forces visuality into the background, symbolically dismantling sight through the image of the burning house, the *movie's* final sequence. I was left with the feeling of an immense sensory potential on the other side of the cinema 'looking-glass'.

In the Arsenal, Toronto based artist Max Dean presented *The Table: Generation A* (1984–2001), an interactive *table* programmed to select a viewer of its choice with which to develop a relationship. The table performs a courting dance of approach and retreat from its chosen viewer, but if the subject is unresponsive, it eventually shifts its interest to another. The emotive response this dance elicited was revealing. One becomes acutely conscious of the objective conditions under which something as complex as the emotive configuration of seduction works. Conscious of the table as 'only an object', however *smart*, yet drawn to its behaviour, we find ourselves rehearsing our own emotive history, our own search for commitment in an act of conflicted self-recognition.

With these examples in mind, I am suggesting that there is a strong emphasis in this Biennial on giving primacy to other than the visual sense. Touching, hearing and smelling are real or simulated. In Ernesto Neto's *We fishing the time (warm holes and densities)*

(2001), the artist suspends large lycra tubes filled with a variety of spices from his native Brazil. The work seduces the viewer through a powerful sensory experience of smell intended to elicit for each individual their personal histories and associations, though Neto's objective includes, as well, an invocation of the national collective memory of Brazil's colonial history. Magnus Wallin from Sweden, in his animated video *Exit* (1997), sketches a nightmarish scenario featuring severely collaged, spliced and prosthesis-laden humanoids hobbling and dragging themselves on in a desperate attempt to escape a gigantic wall of fire which relentlessly drives them forward towards a waiting helicopter and the promise of escape from entrapment in a surreal corridor of high-rise anonymity. The cinematography of sharp angles and high action editing, and in particular the amplified and highly sophisticated sound engineering of their hard, exhausted breathing, seems grafted onto their virtual bodies – and ours. Remember *Blue Velvet*. In complete contrast, a wonderfully ironic video from Mark Wallinger's installation in the British pavilion, *Threshold of the Kingdom* (2000), gave us an expanding slow-motion image of travelers arriving through the manned international gates of an airport, as though entering Paradise through some extra-terrestrial dimension of time and space. From Stockholm, Lars Siltberg's video *Man with balls on hands and feet* (1998–2001) showed a man with balls on his hands and his feet struggling to keep upright by constant little shifts of his body in a feat of intense concentration and perseverance. Intense concentration is central, as well, to the video/film *Lasso* (2001), by Finish artist Salla Tykka. A young woman goes jogging in the early spring, stops to visit a friend and finds the door locked. She approaches the rear of the bungalow through the garden and, with curiosity



Lars Siltberg, *Man with Balls on Hands and Feet*, 1998-2001. Video.

and anticipation, looks through the living-room window to see a young man, stripped to the waist, intensely engaged in the immense physical challenge of lasso-jumping. Swinging his lasso in a series of vertical loops, he dances in and out in a solitary display of amazing skill and erotic potential. This focused energy, animated with the clear clean sound of the rope cutting the air to Ennio Morricone's music from *Once Upon a Time in the West*, drives the work to its crescendo: with a sudden snap, the rope lies limp on the floor. The jogger, a tear in her eye, quickly steps back from the window as the camera pulls away behind a garden wall to reveal a very ordinary suburban landscape. Playing scopophilia against banality, *Lasso* reorganizes traditional film's gender roles while returning the viewer to their own possession of a strong sense of voyeuristic pleasure. The latter is partly accomplished in the video through its narrative structure. But equally, it is by virtue of the very fact that *Lasso* is a film short shown at a Biennial whose own structure is, as I've said, similar to an arcade with its quality of mobility and carnival choice, that *Lasso*,

and other works, are taken out of the predictable realm of conventionalized subject-object relations and inserted – with us – into another.

As I mentioned in connection with *The Paradise Institute*, if traditional cinema's isolating power can be seen as one formation of spectacle, essentially narcissistic, this Biennial moves us beyond Debord's negative association of spectacle with forms of alienation. Debord called for a return to *real* communication, a question that has always begged which *real* in the real world would count. In this Biennial, it seems that the grounds for the real have shifted from abstract morality towards a visceral sense of encounter. As we hop in and out of pavilions and Szeemann's mini-theatres, talking, meeting friends, making appointments, the



expanded spectacle of the Biennial's arcade subverts the introspective spectacle of cinema's narcissistic voyeurism. We are, as in Lasso, *returned* to the excitement of a shared experience from which, I believe, we are not likely to retreat. Szeemann's *Platea dell'Umanita* belongs to the artists, but it belongs more profoundly than in the usual clichés, to ourselves, the throng in the arcade. As I hope to have

demonstrated through my few descriptions, this Biennial apprehends lived experience and locates both artist and viewer within the euphoria – or abyss – of *real* bodily sensation. This Venice Biennial takes us to the movies, and gives them back to us.

YVONNE LAMMERICH