

ALFREDO JAAR

NOTES ON **VENEZIA, VENEZIA**

Following the Venice Biennale's creation in 1895, the countries and architects invited to build the first foreign pavilions were chosen as early as 1907. This selection consequently reflects the monarchic order of the time. More than a hundred years later, the entire world of culture gathers in Venice every two years and conforms to this antiquated structure. Extraordinarily, the Biennale still only includes 28 national pavilions in the Giardini, leaving all other countries forced to search through Venice's labyrinth for a space to rent at outrageous costs. It is true that other countries can rent a space elsewhere to showcase their artists. But what does the architecture of the Giardini tell us? It clearly reaffirms an old, obsolete order that does not correspond to actual reality. And for an African artist visiting the Giardini, for example, the total absence of a single pavilion dedicated to any African country communicates clearly what the so-called Western world thinks of Africa or African culture: it does not exist.

My project *Venezia, Venezia* consists of recreating, inside the Pavilion of Chile (a space rented inside the Arsenale), one of the many bridges found in Venice. On this bridge sits a 5m x 5m metal pool filled with water. Approximately every three minutes, a familiar structure begins to emerge from the water and rises above the surface. It is a perfect replica of the Biennale Giardini with their 28 pavilions at a 1:60 scale. Made of gray resin, the model resembles the city's very monuments. Peering for a few seconds only, the Giardini reveals itself just long enough to be recognised in a brief marvel before it swiftly drowns back into the dark water and disappears completely.

I have tried to create a future where the Biennale's Giardini have disappeared. In their brief emergence, they are a ghost from history. *Venezia, Venezia* is a poetic invitation to rethink the Venice Biennale model.

Removing the Giardini's entire infrastructure suggests that it does not accommodate the globalised nature of current contemporary culture. The pavilions and their archaic rigidity dissolving into the flowing depths of water reflect the manner in which these pavilions have lost their meaning in the fluidity of today's world of culture.

A utopia is created the very instant the Giardini vanish, for the space of the pool becomes a historical opportunity for rebirth.

With the Biennale purged of its burdening skeleton, the Pavilion of Chile transforms itself into a conceptual ground for new possibilities. Drowning the Giardini abolishes the authority of an old-fashioned global hierarchy in the hope that a redeemed Biennale may emerge from the abyss.

In dialogue with the embodiment of such a historical fantasy is the depiction of another historic cultural moment: a suspended lightbox containing a 1946 black and white photograph of Lucio Fontana visiting his Milan studio in ruins upon his return from his native Argentina after World War II.

By recalling the past, this image triggers a flashback of this moment in history where the world was emerging from the disaster of war, and when culture suffered so severely. Nevertheless, as the post-war artists of Italy demonstrated, including Fontana in visual arts but also Rossellini, Visconti and De Sica in film, Moravia, Pavese or Ungaretti in literature and so many others, these extraordinary intellectuals were able to overcome years of isolation and devastation and reintroduce Italian culture to the world. Shortly after, another extraordinary group of artists emerged: filmmakers like Antonioni, Bertolucci and of course Pasolini and artists like Pistoletto, Boetti, Calzolari and countless others that illuminated the cultural scene of Italy and the world. Culture can affect change.

Venezia, Venezia reveals a Venice still haunted by ghosts that include not only past wars and leaders but also defunct architecture. Similarly to reconstruction that follows war, the creation of a new order, for the Biennale and for Italy, is achievable. Lucio Fontana and the others have shown us that the possibilities for change and progress are real.

Venezia, Venezia is a melancholic call to think about how today's culture, composed from a new complexity of global networks, can be adequately represented on a world stage. It examines the ability of the Biennale's current rigid and divisive structure to adapt to the transnational state of contemporary culture and it reminds us of the importance of diversity as well as the extraordinary potential of cultural democracy.

Why is it important to focus on the Venice model? Because artists create models of thinking the world. If we look at the state of the world today, what do we see? We see walls being built around countries, we see immigrants being expelled, we see the unbalance between rich and poor growing, we see economies collapsing. Why should the world of culture mirror so perfectly that reality? It should not. We will perhaps not change the world but we can make at least the effort of not replicating it so perfectly inside the world of culture. Artists create models of thinking the world. Let us create a Venice model that is not a replica of the unbalances of our world.

I was invited to participate in the *Aperto* section of the Venice Biennale in 1986. It was the first time an artist from Latin America had been invited to participate in the international exhibition. I will always remain very grateful to Achille Bonito Oliva and Thomas Sokolowski for an invitation that changed my career and my life. The title of the exhibition said it all: *Aperto*, open. It was a generous aperture of the Biennale to artists like me, who until then were considered 'peripheral'. This took place three years before *Magiciens de la Terre*, the exhibition that, according to many observers, changed the face of contemporary art. One morning, while installing my work in the Arsenale, I started thinking about the Giardini architecture and how it did not reflect the world in which I lived. I think that at that very precise moment, *Venezia, Venezia* was born.