Candide Cameras

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Opposite page, top: **View of "Karen Kilimnik," Fondazione Bevilacqua La Masa, Palazzetto Tito, Venice, 2005.** Bottom, left: **Karen Kilimnik, *the pink room*, 2002,** water-soluble oil on canvas, 14 x 11". Right: **Karen Kilimnik, *the blue room*, 2002,** water-soluble oil on canvas, 14 x 11".This page: **Guerrilla Girls, *Benvenuti alla Biennale Femminista!* (Welcome to the Feminist Biennial!), 2005,** digital print, 17' x 13' 1¼". From "Always a Little Further," Arsenale.

ELISABETH SUSSMAN

"All's for the best in this best of all possible worlds."
—from Leonard Bernstein's *Candide* (1956)

In 1956, when Eisenhower's America was perhaps at its most optimistic, Leonard Bernstein puckishly premiered his opera *Candide* on Broadway. A collaboration between the composer, playwright Lillian Hellman (book), and poet Richard Wilbur (lyrics), the work celebrates the stinging satire of Voltaire's 1759 novella. To the accompaniment of Bernstein's sprightly score, Candide's philosophically inclined tutor, Pangloss, puts forward the notion to his pupil that the world as it is—no matter its evils, natural and political—is perfect, a projection of God's perfection; ndeed, it is the best of all possible worlds. The doctor's great wisdom is accepted unthinkingly by all save Candide, who, beset by countless calamities—brutal floggings, the rape and murder of loved ones, shipwreck, the great Lisbon earthquake, even the Inquisition—continually questions his mentor's teachings, in the end rejecting all utopian talk in favor of tending his garden. The more perspicacious members of Bernstein's audience—with World War II, the Holocaust, Hiroshima, the Korean War, and the McCarthy hearings still fresh in their minds—would doubtless have perceived the contemporary relevancy of Voltaire's mordant satire. And is *Candide* any less pertinent today?

There may be something inherently Panglossian in the very notion of the "Grand Show," and no show is grander than the International Art Exhibition of the Venice Biennale. When the fledgling Italian biennial first introduced the curated international show in the Giardini in 1895 (the exhibitions in the Arsenale wouldn't come for nearly a century), the notion that one could represent not merely the gamut of international art but the best of it wouldn't have been seen as hubristic delusion but as a worthy and attainable ideal (the best of all possible art worlds?). One hundred and ten years later, however, belief in such a utopian project is simply unavailable to us. Or is it?

The 51st International Art Exhibition, staged by María de Corral and Rosa Martínez in Venice this year, answers yes and no, and the success of their efforts lies precisely in that productive paradox. The titles of their respective shows—"The Experience of Art" and "Always a Little Further"—belie a fundamental optimism, a persistent belief in the progressive nature of art and in its transformative powers. But while the curators may have taken up their portfolios with a certain utopian attitude, they did not do so naively, and they have built exhibitions that not only recognize but give prominent voice to dystopic visions without themselves succumbing to them. Corral and Martínez's shared curatorial strategy of drift and discovery isn't the stuff of doe-eyed idealists, but it isn't nihilistic either. Introducing her exhibition in the catalogue, Corral writes, "I would like the labyrinthine path through the Italian Pavilion to be seen not as a finished story, but as a process defined in terms of relations between different subjects, forms, ideas and spaces; more like a centre of research than a mass of certainties. . . . [The exhibition] would aim not only at the concept or gratifying visualization, but be rich in reflection and pleasure . . . show[ing] those themes that disturb and worry contemporary society and that the artists' works express in a real, poetic and often visionary way. " And Martínez, in her introductory essay for the Arsenale volume, writes of conceiving her task in the spirit of Corto Maltese, the eponymous Venetian adventurer of Hugo Pratt's serial comics. "Visitors," she wrote, "are invited to accomplish a journey from the belief that art still holds a promise of transformation."

Both Corral and Martínez—astonishingly, the first women ever appointed commissioners of the Biennale—are seasoned curators. Since the 1980s, Corral has been attached to major arts institutions in Spain, including Madrid's Reina Sofía and "la Caixa" in Barcelona and Madrid; Martínez, an independent curator also from Spain, is best known in the States for curating SITE Santa Fe in 1999. There is no doubt, judging from their exhibitions in Venice, that Corral and Martínez want to identify their practice with feminism. This is made patently clear by the placement of big, splashy works by women right at the front of both exhibitions: It's as if the shows that lie ahead in the Italian pavilion and the Arsenale were, in a sense, keyed to these artworks. Corral turns the heat on early in her show, awarding Barbara Kruger the opening statement. Kruger's quasi-fascistic slogans, covering the facade of the Italian pavilion (e.g., "Admit nothing, blame everyone"), rattle the very walls of containment, shaking out any remnant of complacency and thrusting the works within (at times despite themselves) into acts of active questioning rather than allowing them to rest. Similarly, Martínez gives the first room of the Arsenale exhibition over to the Guerrilla Girls, the group of largely anonymous women art activists who have been keeping tabs on the inequities between men's and women's opportunities in the New York art world and beyond since 1985. Like the Kruger portal to the Italian pavilion, which allows texts to bracket the ensuing artworks, the beginning of the Arsenale's huge enfilade of spaces is a bombardment of disembodied recorded messages, all attesting to the

This page, top: **John Bock, *Zero Hero*, 2004/2005.** Performance view, "Always a Little Further," Arsenale. Photo: Thorsten Arendt. Bottom: **Rivane Neuenschwander, *[. . .]*, 2004.** Installation view, "Always a Little Further," Arsenale. Photo: Thorsten Arendt. Opposite page, top: **View of "The Experience of Art," Italian pavilion.** From left: Marlene Dumas, *Stern*, 2004. Marlene Dumas, *Lucy*, 2004. Marlene Dumas, *Liberation (1945)*, 1990. Bottom: **Valeska Soares, *Folly*, 2005.** Performance view, "Always a Little Further," off-site location. Photo: Roman Mensing.

inequities of Biennales past. (And this is exemplary of the show's inherent contradictions: In what can only be seen in an optimistic light as a great step forward for women—"always a little further," indeed—an unprecedented number of female artists were invited to participate in the first Biennale organized by women. But no sooner has one entered the exhibition than the Guerrilla Girls obliterate any feel-good sense of progress for their sex.) This aural assault is immediately followed by a roomful of objects and paintings with agitprop texts surrounding a huge, dumb, spectacular thing by the artist Joana Vasconcelos: a "chandelier" constructed from fourteen thousand tampons. By opening with Kruger, the Guerrilla Girls, and Vasconcelos, Corral and Martínez unite and present themselves curatorially as members of a generation who will always privilege issues of gender and difference in their work, who will always see the flow of art in its necessary multiplicities.

At the Arsenale, everything "looks good" (in a late-'90s sort of way). The installation is austerely elegant, but there is often an element of entertainment. Take, for instance, *[. . .]*, 2004, an alluring installation of brightly colored walls and tables proffering old typewriters, outmoded technology made even more redundant by modification: No matter which letter is pressed, a period will be struck. This engaging work by Brazilian Rivane Neuenschwander, which invites viewers to type (meaningless) messages and pin them on the wall, playfully points to the ultimate emptiness of technology, its quick obsolescence, the hollowness at the core of the vast preponderance of communications it facilitates.

Over the clanging of the typewriter keys, the melodious strains of ever-changing pop tunes waft from a nearby space. What's going on? There, visitors are given the opportunity (courtesy of the Centre of Attention, a contemporary-art organization from London devoted to the examination of the phenomenon of art production, presentation, and consumption) to experience their own death: Lie on a plinth and download from the Internet the song you would most like to hear at your funeral. There was a jolly metaphysics about this work, *Swansong (Schwanengesang)*, 2004, with its New Age acceptance of mortality and its entertaining satire on the ubiquity of, um, entertainment.

Moving on from these improvisatory and relational installations, one encounters Emily Jacir's video projection *A Sketch in the Egyptian Museum—April 24, 2003, Cairo*, 2003. The camera is fixed on an ancient stone tablet in the museum. The only action is what happens over time as people come in contact with the tablet, or choose not to. We see museum staff dusting it, tourists strolling by. This simple projection gives you a lot to think about—not only the way time collapses as you confront the dumb presence of a once meaningful artifact in the midst of the ebb and flow of contemporaneity, but also the relationship between our mediated viewing of the stone slab in the projection and our presumedly unmediated engagements with objects as we stroll through the endless stretches of the Arsenale.

While there are many alluring, often funny works in the show, Martínez's installation nevertheless exudes restraint. So I was relieved when I came upon the mess and disorder of John Bock's performance piece *Zero Hero*, 2004/2005. I first saw it in rehearsal as the installation was being set up and then again later, when it was officially staged. *Zero Hero* is so rowdy and loose and seemingly improvised that there wasn't that much difference between before and after. Bock's subject is Kaspar Hauser, a "wild child" who famously grew up without language in nineteenth-century Germany. During the performance, Bock and another actor roll a raw egg on their arms, apply a vibrating portable mixer to their chests and asses, hang upside down, and pull stuffing out from under their shirts, while on the installation's multiple video screens Bock is seen sticking his head into a bucket of spaghetti and—well, you get the picture. But what, ultimately, is the point of all this disturbing slapstick? A return to nature, to a human tabula rasa untainted by "civilization," is at the root of much utopian thought. Is Bock suggesting—in a performance that is brutish and nasty but, at forty-five minutes, hardly short—that such a return, as uniquely demonstrated in the person of Kaspar Hauser, brings one to a state not of pure goodness but of pure appetite, bemusement, and violence? *Zero Hero*, in any case, avoids the more Apollonian version of chaos—the containment—of much of the art in the Arsenale. It is *intentionally* a mess and argued, for me, the strength of what is now a clearly discernable path through modernism to the present, from Dada to Otto Mühl, Paul McCarthy, Mike Kelley, and Jonathan Meese. (It is interesting, for our purposes, to note that *Zero Hero* was first performed during "Utopia Station"'s stop at the Haus der Kunst, Munich, in 2004.)

The Italian pavilion, it could be said, was curated in like manner, the similarities between the shows extending well beyond the strong feminist works with

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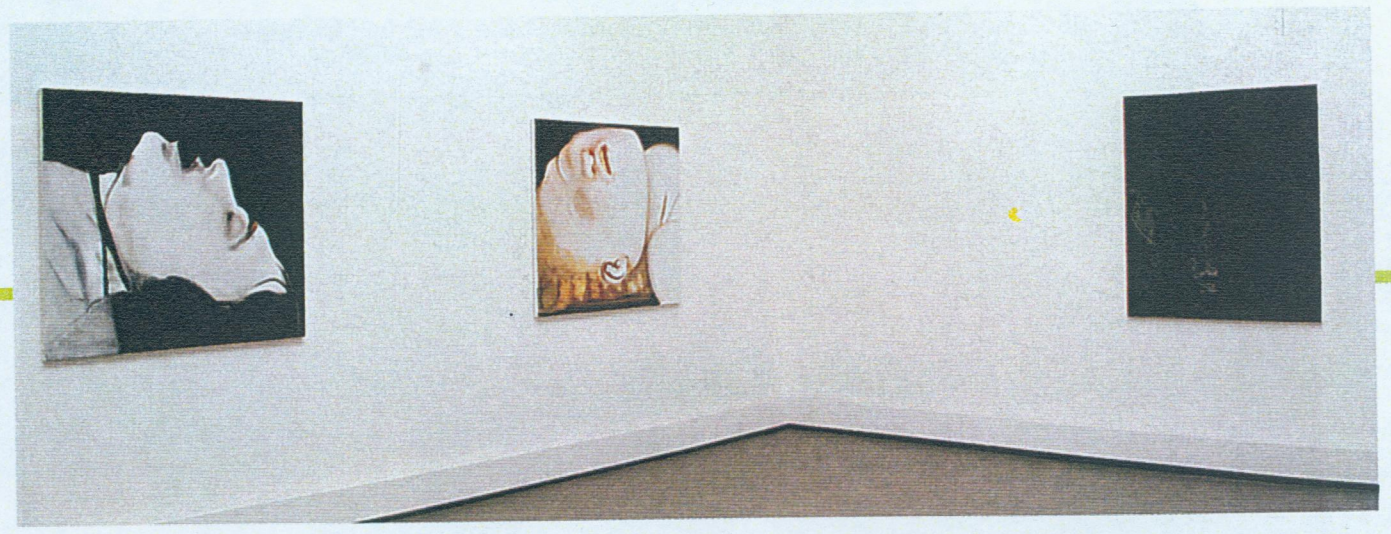
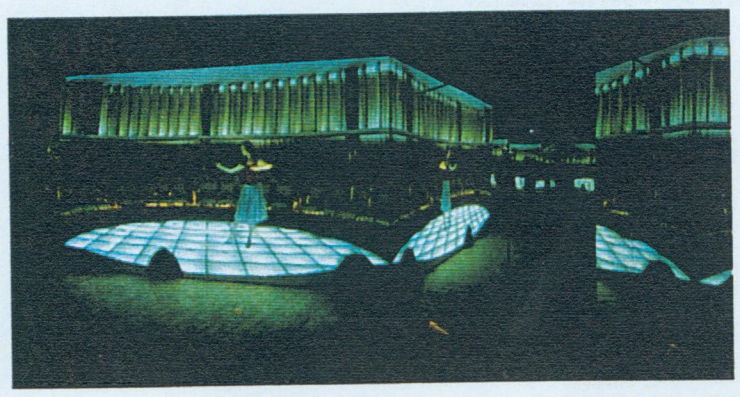


which they lead. Here again, many of the curator's choices would amply arm a contemporary Candide in his struggle to disbuse himself of the notion that this is the best of all possible worlds. But, again, an underlying optimism girds this eminently coherent assemblage of aesthetic objects, and a belief in painting in the grand manner—scarcely conceivable at a Biennale even two years ago—makes a triumphal (dare I say Panglossian?) return in "The Experience of Art"'s somewhat conservative, "hang it on the wall" installation. Certainly no Bockian anarchy shows its face here; but in a strange way Corral, like Martínez, hits on the theme of subjectivity and experience as the core of knowledge in her choice of three painters (Francis Bacon, Philip Guston, and Marlene Dumas), presented, old-school, in a grand enfilade that anchors the exhibition as a whole. Although Bock's roots are in the tradition of performance and action art, it is easy to imagine that Bacon and Guston deeply affected his work, egging it along in its expressionism, its unsanguine subjectivity, its discomforts with the body. (And you'd be forgiven for mistaking Bock's catastrophically cluttered installation for Bacon's famously unkempt studio.) The liquefying male and female figures, spatial distortions, and mean oranges and purples of the Bacon triptychs; the thickly painted nocturnal nightmares of Guston—these were formative influences on today's eloquent grotesque. To this group Corral might have added Diane Arbus, but overall, photography as a medium—either historical or contemporary—is a subdued presence in the international exhibitions.

Instead, Corral played out the painting theme with abundance. Installed close by Bacon and Guston, Marlene Dumas's magnificent group of paintings, many of them depicting figures lying dead or wounded, instantly recalled Gerhard Richter's Baader-Meinhof series of 1988; but Dumas's figures, with their white flesh and mouths and nostrils filled with dried blood, luminescent against dark backgrounds, are bravura passages of loose and spontaneous brushwork all her own.

The expressionism of Dumas, Guston, and Bacon isn't Corral's only embrace of painting, however. Other choices, as varied as Bernard Frize, Matthias Weischer, and, surprisingly, Gabriel Orozco (that paragon of postmedium art-making) spoke to painting's conceptual and self-reflexive reaches—spoke, you might say, to the Candides among us—undercutting any implicit suggestion that painting claims its territory uncontested.



It is exceedingly difficult if not impossible to realize a coherent exhibition under the conditions that the Biennale presents not just its organizers but its visitors—especially the legion art-world professionals whose attendance is mandatory. Despite the air of Panglossian optimism and celebration that typically pervades the vernissage and public opening, the international cognoscenti arrive jet-lagged, and they're bored before they even begin, worn out by an endless stream of far-flung biennials, biennales, and international art surveys of every stripe. One can only hope that this art-world ennui was shaken by the many fine moments of contemplation to be had in the presence of Agnes Martin's meditative canvases or when one happened upon Valeska Soares's *Folly*, 2005, a mirrored pavilion at the edge of the canal outside the Arsenale and caught sight of a man and woman dancing on an empty stage to the dreamy, bittersweet strains of Burt Bacharach's *The Look of Love*. Corral and Martínez took it as their curatorial mission in the international exhibitions to make such works coexist with the harsher visions of, say, Stan Douglas's *Inconsolable Memories*, 2005, a forty-minute "remake" of Tomás Gutiérez Alea's 1968 film *Memories of Underdevelopment* (the setting transposed from the Cuban Revolution to the 1980 Mariel boat lift), and Willie Doherty's *NON-SPECIFIC THREAT*, 2004, a video projection in which the camera rotates 360 degrees around a bald man who robotically intones, alternately, "I am your invention," "You manipulate me," "We control each other," and so on. (Perhaps the most bleakly humorous comment on our current predicament was voiced by a sublimely decrepit Gore Vidal at the beginning of Francesco Vezzoli's *Caligula*, 2005: "What is the point of telling the story of someone who is somewhat insane at a very dark point in human history? I think the answer to that is: Every point in human history is dark.") But as the summer wears on and memories of the Biennale's opening festivities fade, as the situation in Iraq deteriorates, as reports of torture at Guantánamo and elsewhere continue to circulate, as a *New York Times* reporter goes to prison for refusing to surrender her First Amendment rights, and when attacks in the London subways are twice the morning's news, the challenge that artworks face in addressing this world as we are coming to know it, the resistance they must overcome if they are truly to speak to us, from the podium of summer in Venice, is ever greater. Yet it's all for the best. Isn't it? □

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