

# Of dogs and doges

*A 'delicious anachronism' still distinguishes this biennale, according to Jackie Wullschlager*

**D**oes the world still need the Venice Biennale? Never has this queen of art fairs doubted itself so patently and poignantly. In a global market where art and its consumers are ceaselessly on the move, the antiquated elitism of Venice's national pavilions is a delicious anachronism – and one that distinguishes this biennale from all others. Every heavyweight show this year turns on that paradox.

With Britain's colonial-style former tea palace as ironic frame, Steve McQueen, in the most unabashedly lyrical work in the biennale, shows "Giardini", a stagey 30-minute film shot off-season when pavilions are in disrepair, dogs scavenge, insects crawl across rubbish heaps, and the sole human visitors are a bag lady, a cowering figure smoking by night – possibly a migrant worker, half-concealed in the shadows of the pavilions' national majesty – and a pair of gay cruisers. As in all McQueen's work, the painterly is subtly political and formal means are democratic: projected on to a split screen, everything receives equal attention, like an all-over canvas with no compositional centre, no definitive reading, no certain narrative.

Watching "Giardini"'s long vistas and trembling close-ups bleed into one another, now in saturated blurry colour, now in sharp monochrome evocative of film noir, is like watching paint dry. The effect is slow, contemplative, full of beauty and interest, yet also predictable – bells toll, rain lashes – and, I suspect, owing much of its lush appeal to a sense of the moment which may not outlast Venice. Tickets for this timed-entry show were like gold dust at the opening weekend – the final sarcastic twist of a work contrasting darker realities for life's excluded with art world glamour and privilege.

For seriousness of purpose enacted with elegant rigour, McQueen's only rival is Bruce Nauman's "Topological Gardens", the American entry that won this year's Golden Lion. So uneasy is Nauman with the system of national pavilions that he has split his show between two city venues and the Giardini. Beginning with America's miniature White House, he has lined

the exterior with his subversive neon frieze "Vices and Virtues" (1983-88), placed the dizzy, questioning spiral "The True Artist Helps the World by Revealing Mythic Truths" (1967) in the rotunda, and opened up this always forbidding pavilion by installing a glass room. Here resin skulls spit jets of water in "Three Heads Fountain" (2005) and "Fifteen Pairs of Hands" (1996) in white bronze clasp, implore, crush, twist and arch in a ballet of pain and desire. These expressive crescendos of aggression mount further with the audio piece of wavy, disembodied voices "Get Out of My Mind, Get Out of This Room" (1968), at the university site at Tolentini, and "Double Steel Cage Piece" (1974) at Ca' Foscari.

Minimalist and existentialist, Nauman was always concerned with the dissolution of boundaries between personal and public space, and between the individual and the other. Thoughtfully curated around core themes – heads and hands, sound and space, fountains and neons – these three exhibitions amount to a condensed retrospective documenting his four-decade exploration of collective psychological neuroses. Venice's ornament and theatricality sets off his muted, unyielding aesthetic to superb effect, proving that even a celebrated artist resonates anew here. And with Nauman all over town, it is impossible to miss that today's conceptual artists, though none approaches his intellectual scope or inventiveness, remain strikingly indebted to this seminal artist.

The comparison makes most look derivative and very thin indeed. In "Le Grand Soir", Claude Lévêque transforms the French pavilion into a cage: stainless steel bars, mother of pearl walls, billowing black flags. For Germany, embarrassed not only by the fascist architecture of its Hitler-commissioned pavilion but by the very notion of artistic national identity, British artist Liam Gillick challenges both with rows of plywood shelves topped with a model cat: a feeble parody of minimalism.

In "The Collectors", Elmgreen and Dragset's take on the smooth transactions between art, design and money, the Danish pavilion is for sale and its neighbour, the Nordic one, is a collector's glass-and-alu-

minium showcase. An effigy of the collector himself lies drowned in the swimming pool outside: perhaps the inconsequence of the work within – Elmgreen and Dragset's own twinned porcelain sinks "Marriage", Maurizio Cattelan's fibreglass dogs, Henrik Olesen's faux-Sol Le Witt "Cubes" – drove him to suicide. "The End", Ragnar Kjartansson's contribution for Iceland suggests as much: we step into a continuous performance piece in which Kjartansson smokes, drinks, paints bad portraits and accepts contributions from the public. The young Belgian artist who accompanied me there wrote the word "Nothing" on a scrap of paper and handed it over.

Naumann, McQueen and the shimmering canvases of water and light by Spain's grand gestural painter Miquel Barceló apart, this is an exceptionally poor biennale. The international pavilions in the Giardini and the Arsenale curated by this year's director Daniel Birkbaum lack direction, thought, identity and quality. "Ttetia 1, C" – suspended squares of gold threads transforming the crumbling brick pillars of the Arsenale's rope factory into transcendent shafts of light – by Brazilian Lygia Pape, who died in 2004, is the single outstanding sculpture. It is surely damning that the Golden Lion for best artist in Birkbaum's irredeemably trite show went to Tobias Rehburger – for designing the café.

After dosing up on espresso there, I strolled to the domed Russian pavilion for "Victory over the Future". Here at least are ideas, images – and also no fear of nationhood. Pavel Pepperstein's modest mock-utopian illustrations and Alexey Kallima's noisy fluorescent frescoes of shrieking crowds are nicely balanced, but the advertised highlight, Andrei Molodkin's pumping blood-and-oil sculpture "Scarlet and Black", critiquing the world's fuel wars, had broken down. It remained cordoned off on a revisit. I am wondering whether its collapse was intentional: to swell Venice's imperial theme into brilliantly symbolic dysfunction, in response to a western art world gripped by end-of-empire paralysis.

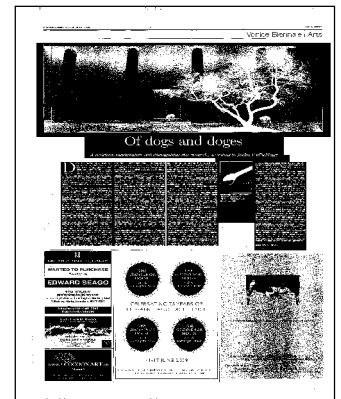
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**Contemplative** Stills from Steve McQueen's film 'Giardini' (2009) at the British pavilion



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