

Veneziano: Ventriloquizing Venice- a response to Malcolm Payne

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[Written in response to “Viva Venice... Viva... Long live!” where “Malcolm Payne takes issue with Mario Pissarra’s objections to an emphasis on the importance of the Venice Biennale”, ArtThrob June 2006]

‘Veneziano’ is the local Venetian dialect, which “does not descend from the Italian language but has its own morphology, syntax and lexicon.” (Wikipedia)
Malcolm Payne’s recent extraordinary and irascible contribution to ArtThrob regarding Mario Pissarra’s view of biennales deserves a brief informal response. “Competitions are for horses, not for artists,” said Bela Bartok, and I agree. Similarly, one might say, as Payne implies in defending participation in biennales: biennales are for curators, not for artists. This much is articulated clearly by Payne when he writes that, “Principal curators.... have chosen artists.... not necessarily for their ethnic or national values, but for their work’s capacity to fulfill a curator’s vision [my emphasis] in representing states of play within global art discourse.”

I think that the above is probably true of most biennales and quite possibly nearly all curators. And, if so, what we really need before proceeding to debate the pros and cons of participating in biennales, I suggest, is a critical evaluation of the phenomenon of the rise of the curator in the mediation of contemporary art: Who are these people? Who appoints and remunerates them? Who peer-reviews them? What precisely qualifies and causes them to identify accurately the “states of play within global art discourse” and move art and artists around at whim like Olympian philosopher-gods upon their exotically-located game boards to illustrate their extraordinary powers of global insight? (Now that I think of it, I wouldn’t mind participating in a global art discourse if I could locate one. Would Professor Payne please furnish me with details regarding where the forum for this exciting discourse may be found, which global language it is conducted in and who its principal actors, publications and contributors are?)

For artists, at the heart of this impolite public expression of disagreement lies the question (which I’ve posed on ArtThrob before) “who, principally, are we [i.e. SA artists] making our art for?”- southern Africans, or the generic audiences held in thrall by the imperatives and concerns of the established order of the ‘international art world’ of the global north? To me, this is the only question of relevance to artists practising in South Africa to emerge from Payne’s impatient dismissal of Pissarra’s fledgling and – to my mind (certainly I share his core concerns) – commendable initiative.

I must add that I find it ironic that Payne swipes at Pissarra for launching his initiative in the form of a sole propriety (I see no problem with this in the context of Pissarra’s initiative as explained on his website), when biennales in the format Payne defends

are perhaps one of the most effective vehicles of the commodification and commercialisation of visual culture that exist in the 'global art world,' arbitrarily packaging art, as they inevitably tend to do, according to national flavours at each Trade Expo with boring predictability.

Payne confirms for us that "...the aim of the [Venice] Biennale is to present art in a national context in a global arena." Basically, for various reasons, this is a silly and misguided aim – okay "for our Olympians, soccer players, cricketers, flower growers and choirs" but not for our art, nor our artists – to turn Payne's mean-spirited and pointless touch of sarcasm back on its professor. (Being an ex-footballer, I must point out that national teams are now significantly weaker than many of the world's best club teams, and that many great players, eg. Ryan Giggs, are never showcased at events like the World Cup because their national team is not strong enough to qualify.)

Nevertheless, given the above aim, how on earth will curators concoct and package a 'South African Art' for the global market? This could well prove to be a very ill-conceived and, yes, damaging exercise indeed, if it is carried out. In a recent review I wrote that, "South Africa is culturally diverse; consequently, there are as many 'South African' realities as there are cultural groupings, each with distinct histories. Given this, it would have been misleading to have attempted to identify an essentially 'South African' art. The editor and publishers of *10 years 100 artists: Art in a Democratic South Africa*, a title which suggests diversity concisely, are congratulated for having avoided this commonplace failure." In my view, it is precisely this failure that biennales will continue to fail to avoid: it is tempting, of course, but it remains a sin to essentialise culture (in this relation, put bluntly, many of the esteemed elite of curators and at least one Professor need to re-take Philosophy 1).

To me, the current culture of competitions and biennales is anathema to art. These publicity events – "The Venice Biennale receives more press, television and internet coverage than any other art occasion in the world," Payne assures us – tellingly, this is the first thing to come to mind when he begins to "tell Pissarra why the Venice Biennale is so important" – purport to privilege art and artists, but instead privilege the interests of sponsors, advertisers, art sales people, mining magnates, governments, certain powerful art institutions of the global north, and the apparently omniscient visions of hypercultural superstar curators: Payne writes, "If, in so doing [i.e. participating in the Venice Biennale], local artists (whose work, we remember, is selected for its capacity to fulfill a curator's vision) make an impact on the global market [my emphasis again] with their positive (sic) creative production, then the country's core goals, to showcase excellence, will be realised."

What rubbish. I'd expect to hear something like this from a spokesperson for the Minister for Arts and Culture, not a Professor of Fine Art. Why? Well, I don't make art to further my country's core goals, and I don't know of any artist who does. I do make art which aims to address the people who live in this region primarily, because I know that to be effective art has to be rooted in a culturally specific time and place. If it is able to speak beyond that, then well and good, remembering, of course – and curators in particular are good at forgetting this – that Heisenberg's 'Uncertainty Principle' long ago helped dispense with silly notions like 'universality.'

Finally, curators and their sycophants must remember that artists know very well that the connotations of the term 'globalization,' the current buzzword in the hallowed halls of academia and the world's foremost musea, are very much thinner, flatter and conceptually far less challenging and rewarding than what is connoted by 'postmodernism,' which it has, for the moment, superannuated. Artists are not fooled when this very unmagical word is bandied about to make things sound urgent and important.

Last in line, artists must struggle to remember exactly who we need to be addressing and who and what we are – especially with reference to limitations regarding who we may address effectively – as our efforts and our vision of things seem constantly in danger of being deracinated and hijacked by curator-cum-meta-artist-visionaries for commercial and promotional uses in worryingly nationalist ways.

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