

Natio et Gens: Venice Biennale 2009

The following is an informal reflection on the changing place of nationality and national consciousness in cultural life with reference to last year's Biennale. Having drawn tentative inferences regarding the roles of these, we offer a selective review of what appear to us to be the most memorable national representations. These in turn suggest a paradoxical benefit which an awareness of localised histories may bring to artistic production.

A late nineteenth-century art history of mine refers to Poussin as being 'great and national by his thought' (Smith 1890, 120). Nowadays such a description for a Normandy-born painter who spent nearly all of his career in Rome seems oddly anachronistic, but European cultural perspectives at that time were saturated with the post-Romantic endowment of nationalism, and its accompanying determination to interpret all such manifestations according to the taxonomy of 'national schools', each expressive of some particular *geist* or set of qualities. The pavilions within the Giardini of the Biennale stand as monuments to the zenith of this epoch, the first thirty years of the twentieth century, when governments of all complexions saw that artistic projection could supplement and even justify bids for economic and military dominance. The internal cultural establishments which enabled this drove a hard bargain with their artists; for them to be supported as 'national', certain stylistic lineaments had to be respected and would be crossed at professional peril. These constraints not only had to disclose unique cultural origin but also, in some way, had to make a claim for the future, making some connection with received international notions of modernity, which in this period entailed a negotiation with modernism. The architecture of individual pavilions indicates the tension involved in giving local inflection to such a grammar, from the halting Lutyensesque classicism of the British, the proto-Speer stolidity of the Germans, to the adapted varieties of Art Deco offered by many others.

Throughout the history of the Biennale each participating country's curatorial apparatus has had to effect a delicate reconciliation between what could be called the *natio*, the birth or site of origin of such work, which might be quite idiosyncratic to the artist, and a desire to represent the *gens*, the tribe or people, as at least capable of communicating with others, even if it was only to vaunt their superiority and happiness. Propaganda, in its modern connotation, is too crude a term for much of this process but it should be remembered that such a piece of church Latin licensed and urged on that style first known simply as 'Jesuit', the baroque. Every participating country wants a conspicuous identity but each wants to appear *weltburgerlich*, transcending insularity and looking out to the larger world. It must have been hard work for some of the more sensitive curators when that larger stage was mainly populated by enemies, potential or actual. Thankfully an art festival cannot degenerate into an Olympics, at least not completely; artistic success is never quantifiably and incorrigibly just so. For there to be the esteem on which it rests, there has to be some communication.

This year's Head Curator, Daniel Birnbaum, gave the Biennale the overall title 'Making Worlds' partly derived from Nelson Goodman's compendious examination of how stylistic strategies give artworks a state of 'worldmaking' semantic independence

(Birnbaum quoted in Bran 2009, 101). Birnbaum used this phrase both to capture such autonomy and also the whole exhibition's 'aspiration to explore worlds around us as well as worlds ahead' (12).

Certainly this Biennale was situated in a world quite different from that which saw its initiation. The closed circuits of historical and cultural symbols that constituted each nation's self-representation over much of the last century have dissolved before the effects of war, mass tourism, migrations and globalizing tendencies. These forces do not impress any stable and irreducible stylistic qualities. Modernism afforded a recognisable formal lexicon to encounter, the fragmentation of which 'post-modernism' at least recognised. But the prospect of another representation of a coherent and homogenised future, a counterpart to those familiar industrial analogies, upon which a successor 'movement' might rest, is now very remote. We inhabit a site of inescapable cosmopolitanism which nevertheless lacks any one universally understood cultural theme, where national frontiers are less salient than those of individual cultural self-orientation. If there are now '*worlds*' [stressing the plural] around us it may well be because such deep fissures have opened in our conceiving of what form those 'worlds ahead' may take. The contending completions to post-enlightenment history, offered by the market or Marx, now seem very local to the west when compared to those rebels against modernity who use its instruments so effectively.

It is impossible to bracket off the content of each Biennale from the architectural past, and from the mundane, quotidian irritations, of its incomparable setting. The Republic which constructed such a robust sense of civic identity had no sense of nationhood in its nineteenth-century connotation (Norwich 1982). A precarious, polyglot empire was maintained by a highly effective conciliar aristocracy, able to subsume linguistic differences under a unique fusion of elements of Latin and Oriental Christianity. Nowadays a curatorial aristocracy takes their place, a stratum of movers and shakers for whom Venice is the most succulent stop in a continuous caravan trading between oases of networking. On the boats back from the Giardini it was possible to overhear conversations which disclose how many such figures tread and collide upon an international stage of appointments and residencies, geographically widespread but closely packed within a single social zone. The hierarchies of each participating country's curatorial apparatus now converge and interweave at the top like rainforest trees. And it is evidently the ambition of those at lower reaches to rise to this layer of trans-national matting.

Birnbaum seems to be aware, too, that in an age where leading dealers both market and recruit their artists with indifference to national borders, such state-led participation in a festival like this is nowadays the exception rather than the rule. Obviously, as with all economies, the balance of power has tipped towards the international, corporate private sector. Anxious, it seems, to pre-empt criticism that the Biennale has become simply one more stall in the acquisition marketplace, Birnbaum began his press release: 'a work of art is more than an object, more than a commodity', and concluded 'the artist makes worlds, not objects' (Birnbaum Biennale press release). In a published interview he disdained the art market's 'spectacle culture and commodity fetishism' (Birnbaum quoted in Bran 2009, 101). This is hardly the language of Basel or Frieze,¹ and he intended the Biennale to 'explore new spaces for art to unfold outside the institutional context and beyond the expectations

of the art market' (Birnbaum Biennale press release). Brave talk, and after all the Biennale is not officially a sales driven event, but rather in the way the cash-strapped Republic was forced to open its registry of aristocratic titles to purchasers in the late 17th century, so the intersection between the international curatocracy and dealers and collectors is nowadays inextricably close, with each relying on the other's endorsement, the independence of the first hardly immune from the designs of the other two. As far as the *scale* of works goes, the Biennale was certainly more than the endless, draughty Regent's Park car boot sale but whether the content is so easily distinguishable is another matter.

It was stated in the guide that 'there will be numerous and ambitious site-specific installations this year' (Birnbaum Biennale press release), and a cursory viewing of the pavilions disclosed that probably most of them were given over to total presentations of material which seek to transcend assemblages of discrete works. Birnbaum eschewed any talk of *Gesamtkunstwerk*, however, instead identifying himself with a Deleuzian notion of Baroque integration of media: 'I like Bernini more than Wagner' (Birnbaum quoted in Bran 2009, 101). Given the de-objectifying implications of his titular theme this predominance of installation cannot have been merely coincidental. But it might also have been a corollary of a feeling that if, as the guide puts it, 'art seems no longer to be limited in style or formal and individual interpretation', then its natural state is to offer an enveloping, limitless experience. Five international curators were subsequently asked whether any such limits were artistically necessary or desirable. It is interesting that three of them broadly concurred that in Caroline Corbetta's words, 'without a limit, paradoxically, there is no art' (Corbetta quoted in Bran 2009, 16) and indeed identified these limits as being routed in the our own anthropologies of tradition and ritual, even if these are, as Luca Massimo Barbero puts it 'an integral part of the entire "world system"' (Barbero quoted in Bran 2009, 15).

So in an age when nation, or even locality, no longer supplies us with closed and definable sets of shared symbols and characteristics and may not even have much of a part in our own sense of self, where are these anthropologies to be located? Well here the scope of curatorial intentions quoted above has to be forsaken and as if it were some mega-installation, one has to encounter the *Mondo Fatto* that is the Biennale experience.

The preview of the Biennale is hard work. That Italianate blend of high theory, bureaucratic formality and chaotic outcome acts as a kind of outer shell, a carapace of irritation that has to be broken into as if it were a crustacean before any cultural meat can be extracted. Working across three virtually uninterpretable maps, one cross-indexing only the names of artists, the second too tiny to locate the off-site pavilions and the third, tourist edition, unreliably drafted, the visitor is offered a metaphor of both historic Venetian inscrutability, and also of our labyrinthine cultural present, devoid of easily navigable metanarratives. There are the Kafkaesque circuits to gain passes; a prominent London gallerist told me that faced with queues that ended with 'patronising' referrals to the back of others, she was compelled to borrow one from a collector client, moored up at the Riva Schiavone. And there is also the very closed world of sartorial presence and code. Many opening receptions have door staff more suited, as it were, to be officious flunkies of grand Lido hotels in the fifties or possibly nightclubs, than stewards of contemporary venues. You may have the press

pass, you may be Maecenas himself but only the uniform of the *gens Armaniorum*, worn with shades and poker face, will actually get you in. Some elitism is probably inextricably part of an art festival but Venice gives the impression of trying to indulge a very parochial and, one suspects, ignorant, elite. At one particularly impenetrable pavilion event (Monaco) the successful entrant would have been rewarded by a Ruritanian comedy of uniforms and evening gowns unintentionally eclipsing the work. Finally, there is the expense not of the expected kind in bars and restaurants, but of the parallel exhibitions. The former customs shed by the Salute has now been refurbished, rather indifferently, and hosted an indifferent show of international pieces, indifferently curated. But fifteen euros is not an indifferent price to see it.

I mention the above because in an event created to offer us art without definable limits, the event itself, as Umberto Eco (*Travels in Hyperreality* 1983) observed, becomes part of the content. And as W.H Auden famously described in his 'Musée des Beaux Arts', the high seriousness of past narrative art often contained its own comedically indifferent marginalia (1976: 179). With Venice, the foreground of hassle supplies this role. And the background? Well, this year there was an overwhelming sense of homogeneity of intent. Put simply, many of the exhibits could have been swapped around national pavilions without any sense of incongruity. The *natio* of these works, their site of origin, was more usually than not devoid of any easily understood signs of geographic locality. Most of them could have come from anywhere, residing instead within a conspicuous set of international genres and themes, which nevertheless, as opined above, did not amount to any one salient style. This is not necessarily a criticism, for we have long since discarded any Romantic model of nationhood, but it means that, rather like our globalized and hence embrittled financial system, any failure or weakness is no longer constrained to one place. The Biennale is anything but a forum of works made in isolation, and many of them, so to speak, stand or fall together.

The pre-Socratic philosopher Anaxagoras postulated a universe composed of the *homoiomeroi*, elemental cosmic stuffs, each sample of which contained admixtures of all the others *ad infinitesimum* (Barnes. 1982, 318-341). This analogy might illuminate the cosmopolitan condition mentioned above. It is not inescapable in virtue of being commended by some triumphalist narrative of progress, whether inclining towards Whiggery or Marxism (which also supplied an underpinning of national identity for many). History, like Venetian maps, no longer has any unquestionable order of salience. But rather, we find, in our super-conscious state that every effort to reveal authenticity simply turns up the traces of past abrasions with others. And as indicated above, history is no longer proprietorially divided; chunks of it are available for appropriating and sharing.² Cultural identity has become interpolated and diverse to a degree far beyond any naïve 'multiculturalism'. It has gone beyond a neurotic awareness of how others represent it; rather, it is constituted *from* that awareness.

This places the curators of national shows in a finely balanced dilemma. Straightforward eudaemonism is no longer currency, so either they attempt to put together shows as if national reputation, however dark, simply does not exist, or, like the more intelligent spinners and admen, they sell the idea to their political patrons that at least feigned self-awareness, if not historical self-criticism, is the best means of improving the brand.

Therefore, the content of many of the shows this year suggested that on the whole, national memory is either to be avoided in bland amnesia, or by contrast, is rather painfully interrogated. There was a falling out, a sharp division, between many cases of the (occasionally hauntingly) transcendent, and far fewer of the brutally demotic; it was almost as if most participating countries either wished to show a rarified and, as previously said, delocalised, aspiration, or to dwell on their grungiest, or downright chthonic underbellies. There were some instances of the middle-ground quasi-folkloric, mainly confined to Latin America, Egypt and the Middle East but for the most part one could say that, as far as national self-reflection goes, the centre really does not hold. Pistoletto's *Twenty Two Less Two*, comprising a hall of spectacularly smashed mirrors in the Arsenale, can provide no better analogy of such a shattered reflexivity.



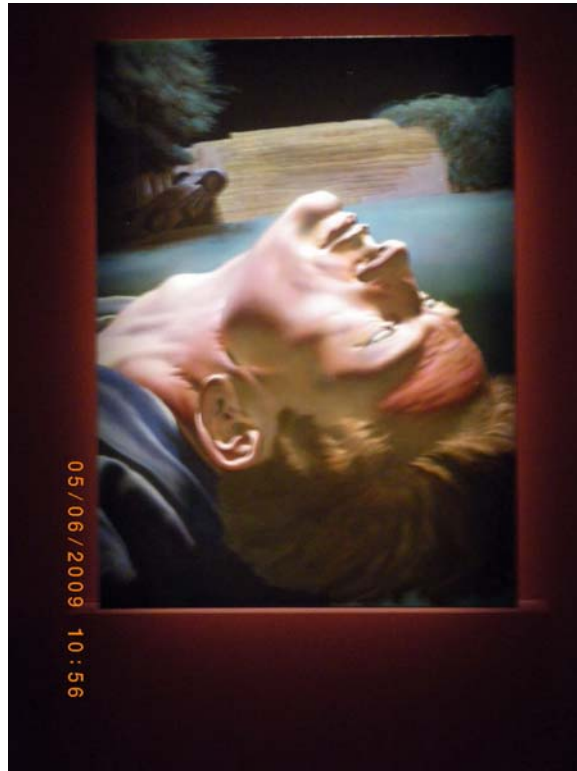
Michelangelo Pistoletto: *Twenty Two Less Two*
Installation with mirrors
(Photo: Sue Broadhurst)

Recently restored, the Arsenale now contains a suite of spaces, originally rope galleries, particularly well suited to installation, and it is here that several national shows were relocated. Italy presented what we considered the most accomplished, albeit deeply unfashionable, painting in the whole Biennale. Nicola Verlatto, whom one of us remembers as a classicizing portraitist in the 1995 Biennale, now a US resident, has produced a compelling and beautifully painted series of neo-baroque homages to various doomed youths of American legend. These are clever marriages of technique and iconographic tradition which serve to exhibit the subliminal religiosity of corny images without recourse to Pop-art disquotation. The rest of the Arsenale was given over to an eponymous international themed show *Fare Mondi*, and here a more direct appropriation from religious imagery informed (the late)

Brazilian artist Lygia Pape's installation *Tteia, I, C*, in which shimmering monstrosity-like threads created a *transparente* without climax. More pantheistically, the Italian Grazia Toderi showed a hypnotic series of projected luminous planet-like discs *Orbite Rosse*, each cross-cut with random shards of colour (see Appendix). All of these works approached a numinous condition by investing received devices with a refined and theatrically disciplined, sense of effect; they achieved a certain world-making haecceity.



Nicola Verlato: *Beauty of Failure II*
Oil on canvas
(Photo: Sue Broadhurst)



Nicola Verlato: *The Death of James Dean* (from a drawing of Andy Warhol 2007)

Oil on canvas

Photo: Sue Broadhurst

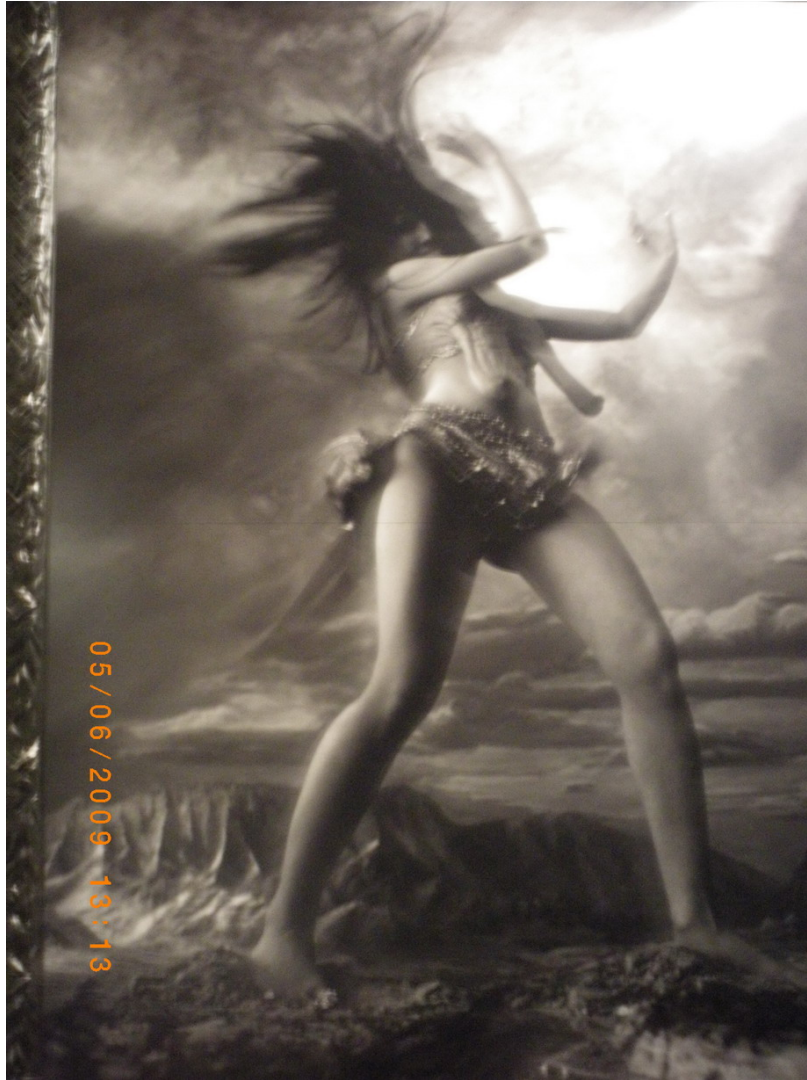
The pavilions of the Giardini are less tractable. After all, many of them were designed and lit solely to exhibit discrete works of painting and sculpture, and enveloping, all-round presentations have to be made to fit. The results can be bombastic. Claude Leveque, representing France, created a cross roads of caged-in walkways which must be intended to evoke the aseptic *carceri* of our times but instead put one of us in mind of some rather butch nightclub in Shoreditch. They can also be utterly bathetic. For some reason, Germany decided to engage our own Liam Gillick, the Conran of minimalism, to install Ikea kitchen shelves surmounted by a stuffed kitten. It may have something to do with reunification. And as for the Scandinavians, well they went the whole hog and had the place done up into a moody Bergmanesque apartment, though outside, a (collector's) body in the pool gives the lie to any social democratic placidity. This last has qualities the other two lack, by virtue of an idiosyncratic implication of private narrative, Nelson Goodman's saving 'twist in the tale' Even if it seems to run true to regional type, at least it is not abstracted from some inventory of Great Themes of Our Time. Installations, as I suggested above, demand some sense of theatre to husband our attention, and this in turn involves an awareness of subverted expectations. I will not invoke Derridean *differance*.



Elmgreen & Dragset: *Death of a Collector* 2009
Installation outside the Danish and Nordic Pavilion.
(Photo: Sue Broadhurst)

Much of the work here left one with a weary rictus of cynical unconcern: Switzerland, Belgium, Korea, Venezuela and Austria in different ways all attained the strange merit of conspicuous unmemorability. But a few pavilions offered far more enduring presences, and these, as suggested above, seemed to result from some prolonged reflection upon the dark sides of life, tradition or community.

Miwa Yanagi draped the whole exterior of the Japanese pavilion in black sheeting in a way which not only made the external structure visually consonant with her work but also created an effective blacked-out interior. Inheriting that distinctly Japanese vein of the hyperbolic and the grotesque which runs through Manga and horror films, as well as Buddhist meditation exercises, which lead us to vividly imagine our own ageing, death and decay, she created a series *Windswept Women*, morphed monochrome images of monstrous nudes, clad with the remnants of sexual allure, yet transfigured into screaming, huge breasted Valkyries. The beautifully realised chiaroscuro and the huge baroque frames evoke something close to Salvator Rosa, but these pieces transcend pastiche or feminist programme to attain a vivid monumentality. Like Velato, Yanagi has effectively reversed the transitivity of Pop's high cultural raids on the demotic; instead, taking what could so easily be videogame material and rendering it into a bleak Macbeth-like *scena*.



Miwa Yanagi: *Windswept Women 1* 2009
Framed photograph
(Photo: Sue Broadhurst)

Faced with an awkward series of spaces, the Russians were similarly bold in darkening the pavilion into a theatrical backdrop. Seven artists were shown under the theme *Victory over the Future*, a title which consciously recalls Suprematist irruptions, part Slavophile, part avant-garde, of the years immediately before 1917. In a sense that could serve as a description of both a society recently loosened from a pervasive ideological destination and of our wider post-progressive-modernist *anomie*. All the artists addressed that strange reapplication of the remnants of collectivist visual rhetoric to a privatised present. Alexei Kallima presented a broadly painted fluorescent diorama of football fans in the manner of a triumphant proletariat, complete with sound effects. Sergei Shekhovtsov transformed a visual metaphor of revolutionary breakthrough into bike culture. Andrei Molodkin filled transparent casts of the *Victory of Samothrace* with dark torrents of oil- and blood-like liquids. There was a brooding, testosterone-heavy feel to this show which implies that the ebb of Marxism has left a wounded, marooned masculinity which still has not found its cultural locus.



Alexei Kallima: *Rain Theorem 2009*
Mixed media installation
(Photo: Sue Broadhurst)

Begging the reader's pardon for indulging in facile ascriptions, this brings us neatly to those exemplars of morose *machismo*, the Serbs. Beuys and his followers introduced the notion of quantities of organic product having a dark fascination. The well-lit Serbian pavilion was filled with what seem to be piles of coarse blankets or even doormats, but on closer viewing the material was indeterminate. It was, in fact, two tons of human hair, collected from hairdressers and barracks, woven into a felt-like fabric. Just as Kounellis' piles of shoes evoked the Holocaust's reduction of humanity into brute material, Zoran Todorovic raised, by this seemingly bland agglomeration, a deft synecdoche of more recent and horrific degradation to 'human product' in his homeland. Around the walls video screens recorded individuals attempting, haltingly, to pronounce foreigners' names perfectly, or encouraging each other to master simple tasks. In such a way Katarina Zdjelar seemed to allude to a war between two peoples speaking a single language, Serbo-Croat, each superficially distinguishable only by accent and orthography, and the fact that it was the accidentals of Catholic and Orthodox missionaries' alphabets that created two peoples in the first place.



Katarina Zdjelar: *Everything is Gonna Be 2008*
From: *But if you take my voice, what will be left to me? 2006-2009*
Four a/v-projections
(Photo: Sue Broadhurst)

Rarely for any accompanying flyers, the pamphlet for this show spoke candidly of 'the troubled context of national presentation' and of 'major concerns, as both specific to Serbian society but also to the larger world-in-crisis' (Pavilion of Serbia Press Release). Considering that, as with Millwall FC fans, Serbian political consciousness could until recently have been summed up as 'nobody likes us and we don't care', these strong works indicate that at least some figures in a cultural establishment are brave enough to let art take on the work of national examination of conscience.

The richest and most accomplished web of experience, to these authors' minds, was provided by the Hungarian Péter Forgács. Evoking a Wagnerian term as against Birnbaum's preferred baroque, his work is described as a "'total" installation' entitled "*Col Tempo*"-*The W. Project*, the first phrase being an inscription presented to the viewer in Giorgione's portrait of age, *La Vecchia*. And this is how the tour began; a morphing of subtle movements and lights gave Giorgione's old woman the semblance of conversational engagement, as was done with a lightbox of a late Rembrandt self-portrait. From these subjects of time, ennobled by artistic gaze, there followed a dark gallery of similar, weirdly lit faces where the inspection was markedly more detached, in the manner of Gericault's portraits of the insane. Then came a flickering videowall of documentary clips; most, obviously, forties footage of military prisoners taken on the Eastern front. Here the gaze of the filmmaker was at its most pitilessly objectifying, and that of the subjects mutely terrified, smiling abjectly to make some bond with their captors. Beyond a curtain, various excerpts from a Nazi film on racial characteristics showed prisoners measured and moulded for plaster casts, whilst a scientist's laboratory bench displayed prostheses, glass eyes and hair, an allusion to God-knows-what vivisectionary horrors awaited some of these men, which was all the more gripping for being so understated.



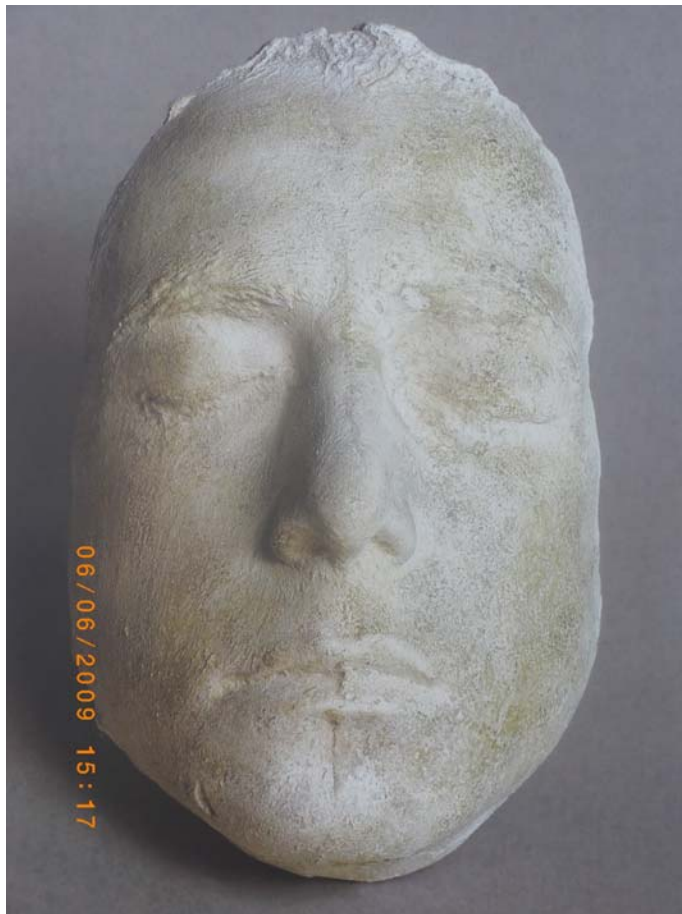
Péter Forgács: *Archive*
From: “*Col Tempo*” – *The W. Project*
(Photo: Sue Broadhurst)



Péter Forgács: *Details from film footage shot at
Kaisersteinbruch – Wolfsberg POW Camp and district
1940-41*
From: “*Col Tempo*” – *The W. Project*
(Photo: Sue Broadhurst)



Péter Forgács: *Details from film footage shot at Kaisersteinbruch – Wolfsberg POW Camp and district 1940-41*
From: “*Col Tempo*” – *The W. Project*
(Photo: Sue Broadhurst)



Péter Forgács: *Plaster Cast of Face*
From: “*Col Tempo*” – *The W. Project*
(Photo: Sue Broadhurst)

Description does not do justice to the impact of this assemblage, and though the pamphlet made Lacanian noises about the ‘Gaze’ and the ‘Other’ (Jay 1993), as in all the best work, theoretical tropes are unnecessary to a power to ‘make a world’. Forgács, appropriately, was awarded the Erasmus Prize two years ago; for ‘humanist’ is a term that lends itself without risk of cliché. This was an intense examination of how physiognomic codes determine, and are determined by, our intuition of other minds and selves, or, as the text put it ‘identifying with or identifying as’. And it is a theme not without political moment: the ‘paranoid xenophobia’ also mentioned, was, as Nazism, a force with which a Hungarian regime collaborated in wartime (“*Col Tempo*”-*The W. Project* Press Release).

The above selection was not made to fit a pre-existent thesis; these pavilions simply lodged in the memory in a way no others could. That said, a strong conclusion could be drawn here: if there is something in history or collective consciousness that has frequently been hidden or dismissed out of embarrassment or shame, then this will surely provide the most fertile material for future work. In a sense this Biennale stood at an antipodean point as compared to the competing gestures of self-aggrandisement of its earliest years. Nationality is now an incomparable sump of tractable dark matter, and we would urge curating bodies everywhere to encourage artists to excavate it systematically. It would be wonderful to see certain regimes confronting the paradox that cultural eminence might lie in historical self-humiliation. They might recall that refugees fleeing dark-age chaos, hiding out in a salt marsh, were the inception of Venice itself.

¹ An annual contemporary art fair held at a tented site in central London since 2003.

² This was illustrated by Fiona Tan’s installation in the Dutch pavilion, which included excerpts from the Venetian Marco Polo’s accounts of his Oriental travels.

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