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Thanks in part to the efforts of George W. Bush, it is now safe to drop the *F* bomb on broadcast TV

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Sweet freedom *Visitors can help themselves to a field of licorice candies by Gonzalez-Torres*

EXHIBITIONS

In Search of Surprises. This year's entries at the venerable Venice Biennale range from the second-rate to the sublime

BY RICHARD LACAYO

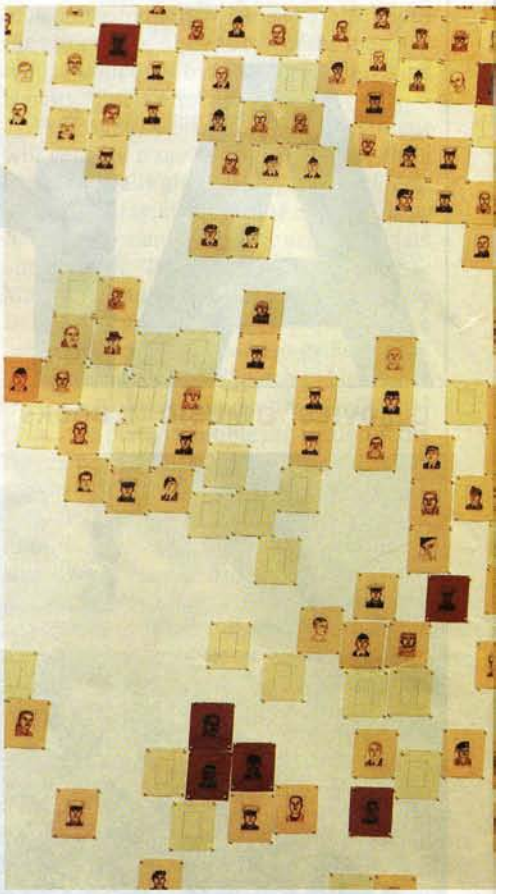
IS IT TRUE WHAT HENRY JAMES SAID ABOUT Venice? "There is nothing left to discover or describe, and originality of attitude is utterly impossible." Certainly there's no point in trying to think of something new to say about the canals, the gilded palaces or the fat pigeons in San Marco. But every two years—this is one of them—Venice itself comes up with something new, the Venice Biennale, founded in 1895 and now the world's oldest international art fair.

The current edition, which opened on June 10, is more international than ever, with 76 participant nations, 34 of them at the Arsenale and the Giardini, the Biennale's main venues, and the rest scattered around the city. For each Biennale a "Commissioner" is chosen who organizes the big international group show that is a centerpiece of the fair. This is the first Biennale ever headed by an American, Robert Storr, a former curator at the Museum of Modern Art in New York City and dean of the School of Art at Yale University. "Biennales are a crash course in contemporary art," he says. "They're a

Elisabetta Villa—Getty

place where the general public at a relatively low cost can come and find out what's going on in the world."

And he means the world. Storr's Biennale puts a heavy emphasis on artists from non-Western nations. At the Arsenale he devotes one large exhibition space to Turkey, which had never before taken part in the Biennale, and another to work from all across Africa. It was also on Storr's recommendation that the Biennale's Golden Lion for Lifetime Achievement was presented on opening day to Malick Sidibé, a photographer from Mali whose wonderful studio portraits and pictures of people getting ready for a night on the town combine a fine eye with a very at-ease sense of the people he looks at and lives among.



Realm of the senses *Clockwise from right: U.S. artist Emily Prince's* American Servicemen and Women Who Have Died in Iraq and Afghanistan; *Yinka Shonibare's* How to Blow Up Two Heads at Once; Petro-Angel *by India's Riyas Komu; Sophie Calle in front of a screen from her energetic installation* Take Care of Yourself

The group show that Storr has organized at the Arsenale and the Giardini, with nearly 100 artists from around the world, is called "Think with the Senses, Feel with the Mind." Storr has described it as an attempt to demonstrate that the line separating conceptually based work from art that emphasizes material and pleasures—otherwise known as beauty—is no barrier at all. Each kind of art draws from the other. But what most people will be struck by, at least in the exhibition's first half, is the heavy presence of art, a great deal of it photography, that's politically engaged. This is a show in good measure about a world in a state of emergency—in the Middle East, Africa, the Balkans, along the Korean Demilitarized Zone and countless borders—an emergency that is in some ways a consequence of modernity, and in other ways a consequence of our failure to be modern enough.

And what about the Western nations? Their pavilions luxuriate out at the Giardini, the wooded park that is the Biennale's second main site. The U.S. is represented this year by Felix Gonzalez-Torres, who was just 38 when he died of AIDS-related illnesses in 1996. By that time he had already become widely known for work that gently undermined notions of how art operates. He made piles of posters that gallery visitors could take away, and spread fields of wrapped candy on the floors for them to pocket. His art could be as perishable as life, and as persistent.

It's unusual but not unprecedented for a nation to be represented at the Biennale by an artist who's no longer living. Robert Smithson, who died in a plane crash in 1973, was the U.S. representative nine years later. All the same, the choice of a dead artist denies the important Biennale spotlight to a living one. Before and after his death, but especially after, Gonzalez-Torres' work was widely circulated around the museum world. But it was a brief life, a relatively small output, and it's been seen quite a bit. So there's no sense of surprise or discovery in this show, a big part of what makes any other pavilion exciting. (Assuming it's exciting at all.) Inevitably, the Gonzalez-Torres show feels sealed off and commemorative.

Which you certainly couldn't say about the French pavilion. The 54-year-old Parisian artist Sophie Calle has filled it with a multiroom installation, called *Take Care of Yourself*, which is an insanely energetic takedown of a ratty ex-boyfriend who walked out of her life with a pious, high-

ALBERTO PIZZOLI—AFP/GETTY (4)

minded e-mail. Or did he? Halfway through this pavilion it occurred to me that the boyfriend, and the e-mail, might be fictitious. Which makes no difference to the deliciously over-the-top mechanisms of the piece.

In wall texts—most in French, some in English—videos and paintings, Calle subjects the e-mail to a tidal wave of abuse and cunning deconstruction. She recruits 107 women, including a few celebrated ones like Jeanne Moreau, Laurie Anderson and Miranda Richardson, to read the letter, act it out, set it to music or coolly dissect it. Many of them turn up on a video wall on which they perform and deform the text more than 30 ways, including as a Bunraku puppet show, an aria, a rap song and a clown routine. On another screen a white cockatoo grabs a paper copy in one claw and eats it. Calle does everything but attach the letter to the back of a chariot and drag it three times around the Colosseum. She may have been dumped, but she's not one to be victimized, and her installation is a revenger's comedy of a high order.

Nearby is the British pavilion, which occupies what you might call a high ground of the Old World—France on its left, Germany on its right. But its brick and white marble neoclassicism, all those columns and balustrades, provides a framework too imposing for "Borrowed Light," a negligible show by Tracey Emin. Actually, "Borrowed Light" is several negligible shows, collected under a single umbrella. One consists of watercolors on lined notebook paper that Emin made in the early '90s, which grew out of her memories of an abortion. Those were produced not long after she graduated from art school, but before she became abruptly famous as one of the YBAs: Young British Artists with shock appeal. Another is a series of middling monoprints with debts to Paul Klee and Egon Schiele. There are also some larger paintings and embroidered canvases. The best work is four wooden sculptures made from sticks attached to form makeshift towers, totems of ramshackle desire. The worst? That's easy—the wall that displays a maudlin text in scrawled neon handwriting:

You put your hand across my mouth
But still the noise continues
Every part of my body is screaming
Smashed into a thousand million pieces
Each part
For ever
Belonging to you.

You can't even use art as an excuse for something like that. People like to complain that irony is the bane of 21st century culture, but don't forget sincerity. Emin's admirers say that her critics fail to understand that she's requiring us to confront and discard our fastidious disdain for sentimentality. After seeing this mawkish work, you'll want to hold on to that disdain.

In short, the Venice Biennale can be like any massive art fair—at times a cabinet of wonders, at other times an emporium of the second-rate and the inscrutable, with the significant difference that it takes place in Venice, that most magnificent of stage sets. And if you don't find the epiphany you were hoping for here, coming up next is Art 38 Basel, Switzerland's art trade fair, a citywide aesthetic shop floor. Then there's Documenta 12 in Kassel, Germany, and then the Sculpture Project in Münster. Dealers, curators, critics and other determined members of the migratory art herd will be turning up at all four. There's a line from an old Stephen Sondheim song that could be their anthem. Do you know it? It goes, "Art isn't easy." ■