



11th Biennale de Lyon

VARIOUS VENUES
Elisabeth Lebovici

THE BIENNALE DE LYON is “historically a *Biennale d’auteur*,” observes Victoria Noorthoorn in her curatorial statement for the exhibition’s eleventh edition. Given the connotations of the word *auteur*, it is striking that Noorthoorn’s primary gesture is the acknowledgment of uncertainty. “I have chosen to do as artists do: to grope, in the midst of a darkness,” she writes, by way of introduction to a set of nineteen fragmented and elliptical “convictions and questions,” many premised on the productive separation of art from the real. (“Imagination is the primary medium of knowledge. . . . Following Wilde, this exhibition does not chronicle; it distinguishes between art and journalism. . . . It also distinguishes between art and communication.”) In staking out this position, Noorthoorn has managed to establish a curatorial voice of integrity—which, by the way, belongs to the only solo female curator among this biennial’s many “auteurs.” The female voice has been all too frequently repressed in the history of the biennial. Twenty years ago, for its first edition,

there were four women represented among some seventy artistic projects.

That said, Noorthoorn’s is not the only voice to be heard in this biennial. In keeping with her privileging of imagination above the prosaic (i.e., mere “journalism”), the Buenos Aires–based curator aligns herself with a variety of poetic positions. Installed on white walls throughout the former warehouse La Sucrière are a dozen visual poems from 1953–86 by Augusto de Campos, a founder of the Brazilian concrete-poetry movement. The graphic presence of these “words-ideograms” spells out the literary lineage of the biennial, whose catalogue (which Noorthoorn edited in collaboration with writers Carlos Gamerro and Rubén Mira and playwright Alejandro Tantanian) features texts from Borges, Homer, Swift, Gombrowicz, Beckett, Bowles, Kafka, et al. The exhibition’s title, “*Une Terrible Beauté est née*” (A Terrible Beauty Is Born), itself derives from W. B. Yeats’s “Easter 1916,” in which the phrase is used repeatedly to close the poem’s stanzas. Written in the months following the Irish republican insurrection against British rule, the work manifests a posture of confusion as the speaker stumbles between affirmation and negation, arriving finally at paradox.

This halting, searching quality is dramatized curatorially through wavelike rhythms, awkward associations, and spatial rhymes. In addition to La Sucrière, the biennial’s venues include the private Fondation Bullukian, the Musée d’Art Contemporain de Lyon, and a temporarily empty textile plant, the Usine T.A.S.E. If there is an order proposed in which to visit the dissimilar sites (the works are installed so as to prompt viewers to follow a particular path through each building; why shouldn’t it be the same among the four locations?), it is perhaps because poetry has to do with isotopy: the repetition of semiotic units of meaning, with fragmentation and redundancy serving to guide readers toward the articulation of the whole. The exhibition is not a singular representation but rather a plural,



recurring one. As a curatorial principle, this translates into the dismantling or, on the contrary, the concentration of bodies of works. For instance, while Campos's works are scattered, as are those of a number of the show's seventy-eight artists, Slovakian Stano Filko's color-coded cosmology of wooden constructions, drawings, balloons, and rockets, spanning some sixty years, is presented almost as a mini-retrospective. His work in turn may be articulated with Robert Filliou's monumental undulating cloth panel inscribed with a sort of cosmic "history of everything" (*Recherche sur L'Origine*, 1974). Installed on the same

Translation is an obvious issue in a biennial that is driven by the pleasure of texts.

floor in La Sucrière, but a bit distanced from each other, the works of both Filko and Filliou are engaged in a critique of artistic functionalism, immersing the spectator in their ways of making worlds. In most cases the artists' ages or countries of origin, or the works' formal or even thematic affinities, are not the most salient points of comparison highlighted by the installation. You might, for instance, be tempted to build a kind of mental montage juxtaposing the female puppet repeatedly drawn by Zimbabwean newcomer Virginia Chihota with the old-timer Roberto Jacoby's *Red Thread of History . . .*, 2011. Although there is no explicit comparison (Chihota's work is in the museum, Jacoby's in the Sucrière), the artists share an attitude of protest against the kind of extreme violence perpetrated not by a distant other but by a neighbor, as in Vichy France, or an intimate, as in domestic violence.

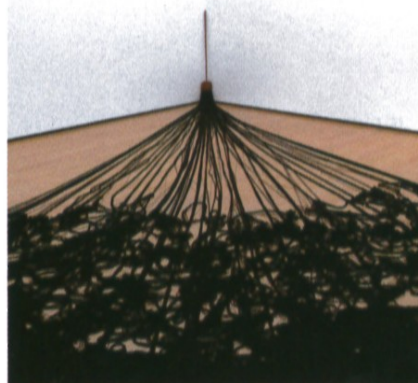
Lyricism is felt immediately in the exhibition's most spectacular location, La Sucrière, through an inaugural series of five large monochrome curtains, dramatically swagged like theatrical drapes and hung one behind the

Opposite page, from left: Eduardo Basualdo, *Le silence des Sirènes*, 2011, resin, pigmented water, apples, pipes, diving equipment. Installation view, La Sucrière. Laura Lima, *Puxador* (Puller), 1998–2011. Performance view, La Sucrière, Lyon, September 13, 2011. Jorge Macchi, *Marienbad*, 2011, plants, stone, resin. Exterior of the Usine T.A.S.E. This page, from left: Katinka Bock, *Horizontal Words*, 2011, ceramic. Installation view, La Sucrière. Javier Téllez, *O Rinoceronte de Düren*, 2010, color video, 41 minutes 10 seconds. Installation view, La Sucrière. Cildo Meireles, *La Bruja 1* (The Witch 1), 1979–81, wood and yarn. Installation view, Musée d'Art Contemporain de Lyon, 2011. All photos: Balaise Adillon.



other above a wooden floor. This work, Ulla von Brandenburg's *Kulissen* (Scenes), 2011, leads toward an enormous circular structure made of wood—the exterior of Robert Kusmirowski's *Stronghold*, 2011, which will reveal itself, from above, as a kind of ransacked library-cum-boiler-room. At the same time, a sound track of strange noises from various pieces fills the air with arrhythmic syncopations. First, there are the strains of an electric guitar, played on-screen by a masquerade-ready Tracey Rose, her body painted pink, butchering Israel's national anthem alongside the electrified West Bank wall (*San Pedro V—The Hope I Hope*, 2005). An insistent slamming and cracking then heralds a vision of Sisiphean struggle: In Laura Lima's installation *Puxador* (Puller), 1998–2011, a naked man pulls against a number of long straps suspended on and around the pillars of the monumental space. Engaging in s/m play with the architecture, the work acknowledges the gallery's confinement and posits its possible shattering. Likewise, the recurring applause of the cartoonish creatures who populate Peruvian Gabriel Acevedo Velarde's animation *Escenario*, 2004, and the labored breathing of Samuel Beckett's twenty-five-second play *Breath*, 1969 (revived by Brazil's Daniela Thomas in a performance that occurs every twenty minutes), are echoed by the liquid gurgling of one of the show's high points: the installation *Le silence des Sirènes*, 2011, by Argentinean artist Eduardo Basualdo. A large, irregularly shaped basin occupying most of the room, it slowly fills with dark water and then empties again—the artist's visualization of the creeping, inexorable flooding that would occur should the moon fall out of orbit and crash into Earth. With its attractive-repulsive tactility—its conception of the planet itself as something that "pulls down" via its gravitational force—the work evokes Bataille's concept of *bassesse*.

Such a notion might certainly be threaded throughout the building, connecting, for instance, to Katinka Bock's sculptures such as *Horizontal Words* and *Curved Word*,



both 2011, which also evince a kind of base materialism. Misshapen, low-lying, floor-bound forms, they were created by dragging lumps of unfired clay around the building or throwing them down chutes, and are at once indexes and allegories of the physical operations that produced them. They take up anew a processual tradition of sculpture, one founded less on the “here and there” of site specificity than on what transpires “along the fault line between (art) object and concept (of art),” as Sabeth Buchmann has stated elsewhere, which gives them a restless presence.

In Javier Téllez’s amazingly beautiful film *O Rinoceronte de Dürer*, 2010, time again inscribes its (s)pace. Shot in Lisbon in the panopticon of a disused psychiatric ward and conceived in collaboration with a group of patients who attend the day clinic at the same hospital, the film mixes the architecture of surveillance with the narrative’s slow circular movement. A stuffed rhinoceros is pulled counterclockwise from cell to cell, and the eye of the camera peeps into the tiny spaces in succession. Each of the cells’ inhabitants partakes in one and only one occupation: exercising, smoking, feeding a bird in a cage, feverishly writing in a diary, sewing, or, in the case of one woman dressed as a bullfighter, listening to the sound of melancholy itself—a Portuguese fado interpreted by the singer Aldina Duarte, who stands improbably before the inmate.

The film’s multiplying references to disciplinary society and the potentials of resistance to it are reflected elsewhere—for example, in obsessively intricate assemblages by Arthur Bispo do Rosário (1909–1989). Confined to a mental hospital, Bispo do Rosário constructed his works as devotional objects that would be shown to God on Judgment Day; thus, each work holds within itself the promise of escape through the anticipatory power of its presentation. At the Fondation Bullukian, utopian architecture (R. Buckminster Fuller’s geodesic domes, constructed here in consultation with his estate and architect Deacon Marvel, and Yona Friedman’s modular, gracefully curvilinear card-

board structure) shows how the built environment may undermine rather than abet disciplinary systems. This play of discipline and resistance is all the more apparent in the curatorial tour de force, Cildo Meireles’s web of 3,700 miles of black woolen yarn *La Bruja 1* (The Witch 1), 1979–81, at the museum. Threatening to trip the spectator, it frames the confrontation of Marlene Dumas’s and Alberto Giacometti’s bruised figuration. The display becomes an emotional sequence of translations and transcriptions when it evolves from the collaborative project of John Cage and Henning Lohner, *One*¹¹, 1992, a film of nothing but shifting light and camera moves paired with Cage’s 1991 sound piece *103*, into a torrent of scripts and notations, from Milan Grygar to Morton Feldman, from Sarah Rapson to Linda Matalon, linking restless time with fragile tactile surfaces.

Translation is an obvious issue in a biennial that is driven by the pleasure of texts. The awkwardness inherent in translation disrupts any kind of essential connection between a text (or an author) and its first language, its geographic origin. Thus curatorial experience should stress this process, which is also reflected in the works themselves, as in the Johannesburg collective the Center for Historical Reenactments’s *Xenoglossia*, 2010–11. This research project recounts examples of how linguistic misunderstandings, even in one’s language of origin, have shaped concepts of difference. Jorge Macchi’s *Marienbad*, 2011, one of the most striking pieces in the show, illustrates this central point of linguistic and geographic or even representational estrangement. The work is a “translation” of the garden set in the almost-eponymous film by Alain Resnais (1961), installed in the backyard of the T.A.S.E. factory. Glimpsed through a window, it lies within sight but out of reach. □

The 11th Biennale de Lyon is on view through December 31.

ELISABETH LEBOVICI IS A PARIS-BASED ART HISTORIAN, CRITIC, AND LECTURER AT L’ÉCOLE DES HAUTES ÉTUDES EN SCIENCES SOCIALES.