

# From Imperialism to Transnational Capitalism: The Venice Biennial as a “Transitional Conjuncture”

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*This essay offers a critical review of the 51st Venice Biennial (12 June–6 November 2005), situating it in the context of the recent history of the Venice Biennial. The review identifies a dual institutional structure (national pavilions and international survey shows) in the Venice Biennial, and argues that this constitutes a “transitional conjuncture” overdetermined by the radicalization and pluralization of art practices (performances, site-specific installations, etc.), the privatization of art funding in the form of corporate sponsorship, and the global proliferation and consolidation of the institutional form of the biennial—biannual survey exhibitions of transnational art practices. The review argues that, while a number of artists and curators have succeeded in the past and in this year’s edition in producing self-reflective and acutely critical art works in relation to the older structure of the Venice Biennial where art was displayed and appropriated in national pavilions, the two survey exhibitions of the 2005 edition (curated by Rosa Martínez and María de Corral) have failed to reflect critically upon the new, corporate-sponsored institutional form of the biennial that the Venice Biennial is moving toward.*

**Key Words:** 51st Venice Biennial, Culture Industry, Institutional Critique, Critical Art Practices, Spectacle as a Commodity, Value of Art

The very architectural forms that populate the Giardini of the Venice Biennial, the main garden where the permanent national pavilions are located, inadvertently reveal the traces of the overdetermined history of this oldest of all biennials. The neoclassical splendor of the buildings of the *fin-de-siècle* imperial powers such as Great Britain, France, Germany (rebuilt in the 1930s), and Italy, the modernist slickness of the pavilions of the established nation-states of the proverbial North—Sweden and Norway, Australia, Spain, and Japan and, of course, the late imperial Palladian style of the U.S. pavilion (built in the 1930s) make it crystal clear, at least for this fascinated viewer, that there is indeed a geopolitically constituted pecking order in the world of art. Any nation-state that does not have a permanent pavilion, yet wishes to participate in the Biennial (e.g., Turkey, Afghanistan, Iran, Central Asian Republics, Armenia, Wales, India), has to rent a space in the city, most probably in one of the overpriced empty palazzos that are struggling to stay afloat (in most cases literally) in a state of decrepitude.

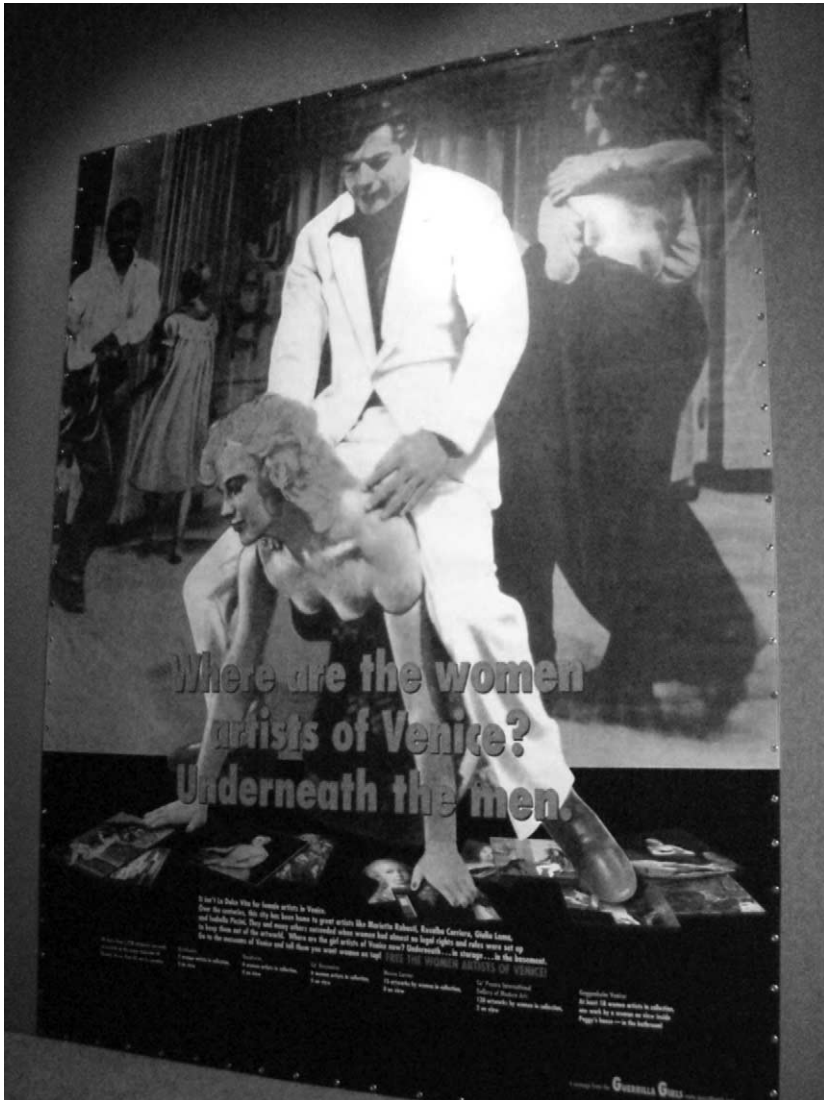
In this sense, the Biennial, inaugurated in 1895 by the Venice City Council, is marked in its very architectural structure by the inequalities of the colonialist world order that has funded and continues to fund the art displayed in these pavilions. In the 51st edition of the Venice Biennial (12 June–6 November 2005) there were seventy national pavilions (a record number), but only thirty of them were inside the Giardini. It is not difficult to interpret the not-at-all invisible garden fence that delineates the borders of the Giardini as the border that separates the North from the South, the core from the periphery. Indeed, in the nerve-wracking humidity of Venice, the temptation to be a postcolonial critic is strong.

### An Uneven Development in Venice

Starting with the mid-1960s, however, perhaps as a consequence of the general radicalization of the art scene, the Biennial has begun to go through an important transformation. When Robert Rauschenberg received the Grand Prize in Venice in 1964, this meant for many that the art establishment had begun to take pop art seriously. The 1968 edition was marked by social uprisings; the 1972 edition was when Diane Arbus represented the United States; the 1974 edition was dedicated to Chile, in opposition to Pinochet's coup d'état; the 1976 edition was the first time Joseph Beuys represented Germany; the 1980 edition was when Achille Bonito Oliva and the late Harald Szeemann co-curated the Aperto '80, an international group show that featured emerging and young artists. In the 1980s and especially the 1990s, the center of gravity of the Biennial shifted from the national pavilions to group exhibitions curated by internationally acknowledged curators including, among others, Oliva (1993), Jean Clair (1995), Germano Celant (1997), Szeemann (1999 and 2001), and Francesco Bonami (2003). (And let us note in passing what we have learned from the Guerrilla Girls (fig. 1), that this curatorial post has indeed been, up until this last edition, a male privilege.) Each curator, without doubt, would invite the group of artists that he works with. And as the curatorial practice has become increasingly transnational over this period, the contrast between these group exhibitions that feature artists from an increasingly transnational pool and the national pavilions that tend to appropriate their artists as the "representatives" of the nation-state has become more and more apparent.

In a sense, therefore, the Venice Biennial has been for the last two decades and is still going through an uneven, incomplete, contradictory—in short, overdetermined—transition from one *mode of appropriation of art* to another. By the appropriation of art I mean the *performative act of situating, understanding, making sense, and making use of art*. For instance, in the earlier yet still perpetuating nation-state/imperial mode, the art product was cast as a sublimated object that functions as *the representative of the national identity*. In other words, the art was appropriated by first the imperialist nation-states and then, in the postcolonial era, by the emerging nation-states of the global South as a symbol of prestige, refined taste, civilization, development, and being modern.

In contrast, the emerging new mode is decidedly a transnational one and constituted by a rather contradictory set of conditions. On the one hand, as noted



**Figure 1** Guerrilla Girls, *Where are the women artists of Venice? Underneath the men.* The Arsenale, Venice, 2005. Photo by author.

earlier, there is the radicalization of the art scene. In the past three decades, art practices that are critical not only in terms of the themes that they explore (e.g., questions of identity, matters of social justice and exclusion) but also in terms of the formal aspects of art practice have gained an international standing. For instance, happenings, multimedia performances, site-specific installations, and other interdisciplinary strategies that have been adopted by artists, in part, in order to resist the appropriation of art not only by the art market but also by the nation-state, have become more and more prominent.

Yet, on the other hand, this radicalization of art practice has been accompanied by a transition in the financing and funding of art. Perhaps as a by-product of the global hegemony of neoliberal economic policies, there is a secular decline in the capacity and willingness of nation-states to finance and fund art. Countering this waning of the public funding of art has been the growing importance of the institution of “corporate sponsorship.” In fact, despite all the revolutionary intentions of the emerging critical art practice, art remains a source of prestige for its patrons, albeit different ones. It would probably be stating the obvious to remind the reader that the new patrons are the transnational corporations.

Without doubt, this dual transition (the simultaneous radicalization of art practice and the corporatization of art funding) needed a new institutional form. As it has become impossible to sell art as a “sublimated” object—the very premise of critical art practices has been to deconstruct the object-hood of art—the need for new institutional *forms*, that would substitute for the art galleries and auctions where art used to be exchanged, has become more and more urgent. I believe that the institution of the biennial is one such *form*.

Let us be empirical for a moment. The number of biennials has increased exponentially in the past three decades. Here are the names of a subset of biennials and the years that they were launched: Sydney (1973), Havana (1984), Istanbul (1987), Sharjah, United Arab Emirates (1993), Johannesburg (1995), Kwangju, Korea (1995), Berlin (1998), Tirana (2001), Moscow (2005). Biennials serve several mutually reinforcing functions. First, they offer biannual surveys of international art practice for the benefit of viewers from the region. They serve, in part, an educational function for the local audiences, for they nurture an appreciation of the “transnational standards” of aesthetic practices. It is important to emphasize, however, that it is in and through these biennials that these “transnational standards” are being set and produced. In this sense, the biennials serve a double purpose. They are simultaneously the sites where transnational standards are being imposed on the local art scenes *and* the portals of subversion where the host cities and their regional hinterlands can insert their own discourses into the transnational conversation.<sup>1</sup> Second, as they have become sites where the practice of the selected artists is valorized (i.e., the economic value of the art practice is *sociosymbolically produced*), they fulfill the economic role of the art market. Third, they contribute

1. Readers of an earlier draft noted the negative tone of the analysis of biennials offered in this essay. Admittedly this essay articulates very little as to the radical potential offered by the emerging system of transnational biennials. Let me use this opportunity to note that it would be wrong to argue that the emerging institutional form of biennials qua spectacle-commodity necessarily entails the *cooptation* of contemporary art practices. First of all, we now know that it is possible to produce commodities without reverting to a capitalistic (i.e., exploitative) form of production and appropriation of surplus. It is possible to produce, for instance, “communist” commodities. Second, the transnational and decentered form of the biennial system somewhat paradoxically enables (or gives the opportunity to) the semiperipheries to insert their own discourses into the transnational conversation thus far dominated/dictated by the core (New York, Los Angeles, London, Paris, Berlin, etc.). Whether this opportunity has so far been realized by the semiperiphery is another question. On the multicenteredness of globalization, see Dirlik (2000).

to the cultural “capital” of the city. And in this third function, they constitute a moment in a broader tendency towards the “festivalization” of arts.

By festivalization, I refer to the global circulation of art through international festivals. For instance, the foundation that produces the Venice Biennial also produces a prestigious film festival and an architecture biennial. The foundation that produces the Istanbul Biennial also produces annual festivals for classical music, jazz/pop, theater, and film. Inevitably, the Venice Biennial itself is also affected by this process and is forced to adopt its structure to the rapidly standardizing organizational form of the biennials. According to this structure, biennials are sponsored by a number of transnational corporations, their local subsidiaries, and the city government; are organized by one or two main internationally renowned curators, preferably well connected with an established network of artists as well as sponsors; and feature forty to sixty artists chosen according to a somewhat broad yet predetermined theme.

It is important to explore, if only briefly, the extent to which this uncanny alliance between radical art practices and transnational corporations is an effect of a conjunctural balance of forces or an inherent shortcoming of the analyses of capitalism that informed the postwar radicalization of art practices. While the period after World War II was when radical art practices really took off, the story can easily begin at an earlier moment—for instance, at that revolutionary moment in 1917 (!) when Marcel Duchamp took a urinal, signed it, and displayed it as an art object. Since then, it has become impossible to conceive of art outside the “institutional” context (galleries, museums, art journals, art critics, collectors, sponsors, etc.) that sociosymbolically produces the meaning as well as the value of the art object (Ruccio, Graham, and Amariglio 1997). As they became increasingly wary of producing art *objects* that can be easily folded into the circuit of commodity exchange, critical artists began to invent and develop strategies that question, subvert, and resist the commodification of art. In the 1960s and 1970s, if Andy Warhol, down at the Factory working hard to erase the difference between the art *object* and the commodity, was at one end of the spectrum of possible strategies of subversion, at the other end there was Beuys, a modern shaman sweeping the streets after political demonstrations and offering this public service as a gift to the community. In fact, just as the “private goods” that populate Warhol’s silkscreens are metonyms of the market-centered model of American capitalism that Warhol was critical of, the “public goods” that Beuys performed were metonyms of the state-centered model of German capitalism.

Yet, in opposition to this critical vector that radically changed art practice was the mounting hegemony of what Theodor Adorno (1991) called the “culture industry.” Adorno’s concept of culture industry relies upon Marx’s simple idea that, under capitalism, what is important for the capitalist is the *form* of commodity and not the commodity as such. In this sense, capitalism is indeed an “abstraction machine” that can potentially treat anything and everything as a commodity, including performances and site-specific installations. In terms of the political economy of contemporary art, this means that even a critical art practice can have market value, perhaps not as an *object* that can be bought and sold by collectors but as a *spectacle* produced by art schools, museums, journals, critics, curators, and public relations experts, through



**Figure 2** A Situationist graffiti from the streets of Venice, June 2005. Photo by author.

biennials, themed exhibitions, and retrospectives sponsored by transnational corporations and consumed by the tourists/viewers as these shows travel the globe from one city to another—in short, a *spectacle* produced by an entire culture industry (see fig. 2).<sup>2</sup>

Juxtaposing an artist who produces colorful, always already sold out, and ultimately decorative *objects* (Thomas Scheibitz) with an artist who categorically rejects producing material objects and who stages *performances* that cannot be photographically recorded (Tino Sehgal), the German pavilion (curated by Julian Heynen) for the 2005 Venice Biennial concretized the inherent limitations of radical art practices in devising sustainable strategies for resisting commodification. When viewers entered the pavilion, if the first things they *saw* were the modern kitsch objects of Scheibitz, the first thing they *heard* was a small chorus singing, “Oh! It’s so contemporary, contemporary, contemporary!” The latter, of course, was a part of the “immaterial” art-work that Sehgal staged for the visitors, and it was a perpetually looping dance-song routine performed by local actors dressed in white and black as museum guards. After a moment of surprise, the sarcasm of the song and its apparent ridicule of Scheibitz’s objects seduced this viewer into thinking that Sehgal is a part of the tradition that criticizes the commodification of art.

This impression was further encouraged in an antechamber of the pavilion where another band of actors dressed like guards invited one to have a conversation on “market economics” promising, in exchange (!), a refund of the admission price for the Giardini. Yet, the conversation between the artist and the German philosopher Peter Sloterdijk, published in the edition of the German weekly *Die Zeit* (24/2005) that came out on the weekend of the opening week of the show, compelled me

2. On the notion of spectacle, the classic reference is Guy Debord’s *The Society of the Spectacle* (1995). For a fine theoretical and political assessment of Situationism, see MacDonald (1995).

to reconsider my judgment ([http://www.zeit.de/2005/24/Sehgal\\_2fSloterdijk](http://www.zeit.de/2005/24/Sehgal_2fSloterdijk)). Perhaps being true to the spirit of his earlier training as a political economist, Sehgal insists that his work is not a critique of the commodity form and that he wishes to sell his works. Rather, he argues, he is producing, just like the contemporary culture industry, “an organization of subjectivity.” The example he uses to explain the formal structure of what he calls “organization of subjectivity” is the case of a mobile phone company that sells a new cellphone every other season by simply changing its “look.”

Without doubt, Sehgal’s analysis of the logic of the commodity form is very accurate and it was his work and definitely not Scheibitz’s modern kitsch that made the Germany pavilion interesting. The very juxtaposition of the two works clarifies for us that the commodity has never been, even in the colonial/imperial era, simply an object, but that it has always been an “organization of subjectivity.” To put it differently, Sehgal’s cynical yet honest willingness to “sell” his performance pieces (Yes, they can be sold!) makes it possible to see that the uncanny alliance between the transnational corporations and radical art practices was bound to happen sooner or later.

### The Crisis of National Pavilions

At least for a couple decades now, the Venice Biennial has been going through an uneven and undoubtedly incomplete transition from a “nation-state/imperial” mode of appropriating art to a new “transnational” mode. Yet, this emerging transnational mode is not simply replacing the earlier national mode. The newer editions of the Biennial have included both types of exhibitions, and there is indeed an “exchange,” a political negotiation between the two modes, that is worth discussing in some detail. For instance, at the 2005 edition, a number of national pavilions featured small-sized group exhibitions with artists who could simply be living and working in that country without being a citizen, who could be living in diaspora, or who could entertain an even more ambiguous relationship to the country that he or she is supposed to be representing. As one example, Hussein Chalayan, who was featured in the national pavilion of Turkey (curated by Beral Madra), is neither a citizen of the Republic of Turkey nor does he live there; he is a Cypriot of Turkish ethnicity who lives and works in London.<sup>3</sup>

Moreover, it would be equally incorrect to claim that only national pavilions featured art qua sublime objects while the “transnational” group exhibitions featured only the new critical art practices. In “The Experience of Art,” one of the two main international group shows of the 51st Biennial, among the more conservative works qua sublimated, art market-friendly objects, one could mention

3. Let me note that Chalayan’s past works have been critical of the traumatic partitioning of the island of Cyprus as a result of the 1974 occupation of its northern half by the Turkish military, and subsequently, by the settlers from Anatolia ushered forth by the Turkish government. To add an additional layer of contradiction to this particular case, let me also note that among the sponsors of the Pavilion of Turkey was Turquality, a private-public relations project that aims to upgrade Turkey’s image as a quality-brand textile and clothing producer!

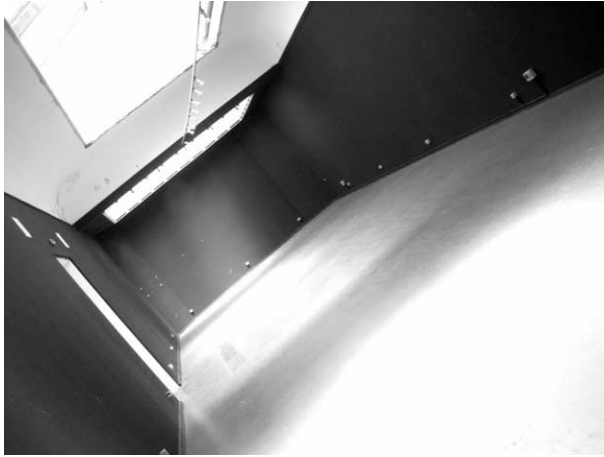
Francis Bacon's paintings, Rachel Whiteread's plaster cast of the void of a staircase, and Thomas Schütte's prize-winning shiny silver voluptuous female torso. Without doubt, since the group exhibitions usually survey works that have already received a "pass" from the art establishment, they are almost always more in tune with the mainstream of contemporary art practices. National pavilions, however, especially when they do not play the game in a savvy manner, cannot help but appear anachronistic. (Consider, for instance, the case of the Egyptian pavilion.)

The crisis of national pavilions, however, is much deeper; playing it savvy is becoming increasingly less effective in keeping this crisis under control. An important work that encircled this transitional conjuncture through the heavy-handed yet acute language of "institutional critique" was offered by none other than Hans Haacke when he represented Germany at the 1993 edition of the Biennial.<sup>4</sup> His work was an intervention to the neoclassical building of the German pavilion (renovated after 1938 under the auspices of Hitler), not only to its monumental architectural form, but also to its institutional function as a complicit mo(nu)ment of the fascist social formation that produced it, both physically and sociosymbolically. Greeted outside with a sculptural detail of an enlarged plaster replica German Mark coin on the pediment of the building, the viewer, once inside, was confronted with a Protestant white cathedral with a capitalized GERMANIA in the apse and an entirely shattered floor. By encircling the institutional as well as the aesthetic complicity of the very concept of the national pavilion, Haacke was "remarking" his own complicity, his function as the artist who was representing Germany, along with the video artist Nam June Paik, in Venice 1993.

In the 2003 edition of the Biennial, Santiago Sierra, an artist who was born in Spain but who lives and works in Mexico, sealed off the Spanish pavilion to everyone except those who had a Spanish passport. While it is quite plausible to read Sierra's stratagem as a critique of the ideology of "Fortress Europe," it would be a mistake to neglect its strong critique of the institution of the national pavilion. By reducing the sublimated pavilion that is supposed to harbor precious art objects into what it really is—a slice of national territory—Sierra was offering his variation on the theme that Haacke began to explore back in 1993.

The 2005 biennial also had its share of subversions of the national pavilions. The artist Daniel Knorr chose to leave the Romanian pavilion empty, deliberately exposing the traces of past exhibitions. Entitled *European Influenza*, the work was an "invisible artwork," a minimalist intervention that exposed the building, the institution, and its performative function in eliciting a concrete identity that would fill its void (fig. 3). Rather than a concrete artwork qua an imaginary object, we were offered a small pocketbook-sized reader (edited by the commissioner/curator Marius Babias) packed with critical texts written by mostly Eastern European art critics, curators, philosophers, and so on. In 1993, Haacke achieved a critical analysis of the earlier nation-state/imperialist mode of the Biennial by adding to the building, by revealing its institutional complicity, its formal and aesthetic readiness to be a part of the fascist machine. In contrast, Knorr's act of subtraction may be read as a

4. For useful discussions of "institutional critique," see Alberro (1997) and Fraser (2005).



**Figure 3** Daniel Knorr, *European Influenza*. The Pavilion of Romania, 2005. Photo by author.

commentary on the emerging internationalist mode that erases the nation-state as a relevant category and the very questions of identity that Romania and other Eastern European nation-states are trying to answer in their recent or impending subsumption under the European Union. The title, *European Influenza*, elicits this interpretation. Yet it also referenced, at least for this viewer, another epidemic: the cholera epidemic that took the life of one Gustave von Aschenbach in Thomas Mann's *Death in Venice*. The reader may recall that that epidemic, like all epidemics, was supposed to originate in a hallucinated "Far East." Knorr's *European Influenza* turns this Orientalist fantasy inside out and designates Europe as the origin of the epidemic.

To put it differently, if, in 1993, Haacke could not bring himself to "represent" Germany without engaging with the institutional and architectural history of the national pavilion, in 2005, Knorr must have felt that it had become simply *impossible* to "represent" Romania. The very existence of the "thing" that the signifier "Romania" is supposed to represent has itself come into question as this country has acceded to the European Union. In short, the transition within the Venice Biennial is itself overdetermined by the geopolitical changes that constitute its context. Yet, it is also important to note that the earlier form persists, that the national pavilions still exist, and that the artists representing their countries are still representing them even as, or perhaps precisely because, they criticize them.

### "Bienvenuti alla Biennale Feminista!"

If the visitor did not learn in advance that this was the first edition ever of the Venice Biennial that featured not one but two major international group exhibitions curated by woman curators (Rosa Martínez and María de Corral), she would do so upon her arrival at the exhibition in the Arsenale, the old shipyard of Venice. "Always a little further," curated by Martínez, greeted the viewer with two giant billboard posters

designed by the Guerrilla Girls. While one of them was welcoming (*Bienvenuti alla Biennale Femminista!*), the other posed a rhetorical question only to answer it immediately: *Where are the women artists of Venice? Underneath the men.* This question and answer were typeset in bold over the famous still from Federico Fellini's *La Dolce Vita* (1961) featuring a beastly Marcello Mastroianni riding a woman (fig. 1). From these performative as well as informative posters, one learns not only that the percentage of women artists in the first biennial in 1895 was 2.4 percent, but also that not much had changed a century later, in 1995 (9 percent)!

Martínez's selection did indeed have a feminist tone, but it was far from exclusively feminist. Rather, it was an exhibition that politicized "identity" in general. As the viewer moved from one hall of the Corderie (a beautiful and endlessly stretching rope factory within the Arsenale) to another, the title of the exhibition started to make sense. In work after work, one saw the same incessant and self-reflective mode of questioning being repeated always in a new context; each work circled around a particular question of identity, each work questioned "identity," each work questioned its own identity, and so on.

Since this was supposed to be the feminist Biennial, let me begin by highlighting some of the more interesting feminist works (or works by feminist artists) in the group exhibition curated by Martínez. In the very first hall, literally encircled by the more familiar Guerrilla Girls billboards, was a huge, used condom-shaped chandelier made out of hundreds of tampons by Joana Vasconcelos (fig. 4). In the next hall, Turkish opera singer the late Semiha Berksoy's expressionist/cubist paintings depicting women and cats preceded Runa Islam's video projection which documented a woman dropping and breaking fine pottery in slow motion. Walk on two more halls and Mona Hatoum's  $- / +$ , a minimalist, circular sand pool simultaneously smoothed and raked by rotating 180 degrees stretched arms, distilled the endless cycle of household labor into a formula. In the next hall on the left was a video by Regina José Galindo featuring a woman washing her feet in a blood-red liquid. In the last hall of the building, after a series of dark rooms featuring one video installation after another, the viewer was sent out of the building with a video work by the Spanish performance artist Pilar Albarracín. In the video, Albarracín, dressed up in a chic yellow coat and fashionable dark sunglasses, not unlike a woman character from a Buñuel or Almodovar movie, rushes through the streets of Madrid with a small brass section following and harassing her by incessantly playing "Viva España."

Yet, it would be unfair to essentialize (even if for strategic reasons) the strong presence of feminist themes at the expense of others. For instance, Brazilian artist Rivane Neuenschwander's manipulated Olivetti typewriters that can only be useful today as objects of art; Ukrainian Oleg Kulik's long "documentary" of his journey into "deep" Siberia; Palestinian artist Emily Jacir's juxtaposition of mundane scenes from Ramallah and New York (hairdressers, offices, grocery stores, etc.); Albanian artist Adrian Paci's short video featuring, presumably, Albanian workers who start up generator motors only to turn their low-dimmed lights on; and Turkish artist Bülent Şangar's overflowing public buses—all are works of art that take as their subject the marginalized other of the liberal democratic capitalist mainstream.

In short, many of the works had a strong political accent, and not only a feminist one at that. Yet, at the same time, the exhibition as a whole felt "reformist,"



**Figure 4** Joana Vasconcelos, *The Bride*, 2001. The image is from the Arsenale, Venice, 2005. Photo by author.

formulaic, and sterile. In other words, even Guerrilla Girls' performative appropriation of the exhibition as a concerted feminist effort failed to give an edge to "Always a little further."

This "reformist" tone was even more accentuated in the other major survey exhibition of the Biennial. "The Experience of Art," curated by María de Corral, took place in the Italian pavilion, which is located inside the main Garden. The works included here were from South African artists William Kentridge, Marlene Dumas, Candice Breitz, and Robin Rhode; German artists Thomas Ruff and Thomas Schütte; British artists Francis Bacon, Rachel Whiteread, and Mark Wallinger; and North American stars like Jenny Holzer, Barbara Kruger, Bruce Nauman, Dan Graham, and Stan Douglas. Several of these left a mark: Ruff's overenlarged jpeg thumbnail images, Dumas's portrait depicting the ecstasy of death, and Breitz's video installation that restaged well-known family dramas between father and son and mother and daughter (in two separate dark screening rooms) through a perfect pitch sampling and sequencing of signature sound-images of Hollywood stars. Also worth a mention were works by the Venetian Monica Bonvicini (a machine-sound-gun hanging down from the ceiling and intermittently "shooting" at unsuspecting visitors), the

Argentinian Jorge Macchi (a forest made out of compressed phonebooks), and the Cuban Tania Bruguera (an elevated corridor covered with used teabags and little video screens embedded within them).

If, however, I call these two exhibitions “reformist,” it is certainly not because the works selected were not radical enough or failed to include in their analysis a critique of various forms of social injustice or exclusion. In fact, in the Arsenale exhibition, both the sound installation by Spanish artist Santiago Sierra and the documentary banners by Dutch architect Rem Koolhaas did furnish the visitors with a generous amount of information regarding the political economy of the Venice Biennial and the contemporary art system, respectively. In fact, these exhibitions were “reformist” not only *despite* but also *because of* the political nature of each and every work.

Let me try to be more explicit. The term “reformism” for me designates the tendency to accept the very formal coordinates of an institution and to try to navigate within it. In this sense, these exhibitions were reformist precisely because they naturalized/reified the very institutional form of the biennials, a form that turns the radical art practices gathered therein into a *spectacle* that has no relation to their broader context—to the social formation within which they are inserted. These exhibitions could have been anywhere: Venice, Istanbul, Berlin, São Paulo, or Sharjah (fig. 5).

For instance, the city of Venice is a city on its deathbed, not simply because it is sinking but because it has become a Disneyland, a site of spectacle, a giant tourist park from which daily life is slowly draining away. Its population has halved in the past decade. There was nothing in these two survey exhibitions that questioned the institutional form of the biennial, its particular economic logic within the changing configuration of art practice, or its effects on the urban contexts within which it



**Figure 5** Anti-imperialist graffiti from the streets of Venice, June 2005. Photo by author.

arrives every other year. If Venice has turned into a revenue-generating machine, a workplace for the people of Veneto who desert the city in the evening, it is, in part, because it has accepted the role of being a *site*—a beautiful one that leases its gardens and palazzos to this corporate-sponsored art event every other year without having any substantive relationship with the art displayed. In this sense, while Haacke's (in 1993) and Knorr's (in 2005) interventions/subtractions were able to question the material and institutional conditions of the imperial/national mode of appropriation of art, the two group exhibitions failed to engage critically with the new transnational mode of appropriation of art qua *spectacle*.

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