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DAYS OF WINE AND POSES

*In theory, the international biennials are purely artistic events. In practice, they have become major market-makers. As the art world heads to Venice, **Marc Spiegler** reveals the business behind the buzz.*

IN THE BEGINNING was Venice. then came Sao Paulo, followed by Sydney, Lyon, Berlin, Istanbul, Havana, Johannesburg, Liverpool. These, and an atlas full of other biennial exhibitions, now dot the globe and the art world's social calendar like a case of cultural chicken pox. In theory, the biennial is a purely artistic event, not bound by the commercial concerns of an art fair or a gallery owner. Featuring artists from around the world that its curators currently consider vital, each biennial aspires to far greater gravitas than a mere group show.

In reality, though, biennials have become major players in shaping the contemporary art market. "Everything is for sale in Venice," says one prominent European gallerist, with the bravado of a man declaring the inarguable. "It's fully part of the market. And why not? Artists don't make works so they can sit in warehouses." Then, however, unwilling to publicly tear at the cultural facade surrounding biennials, he requests anonymity.

What is the market role of the biennial? Though each event remains distinctive—shaped by its location and the character of its directors—all offer an imprimatur to the artists who are selected, declaring them noteworthy practitioners on an international level. And no stamp of approval rivals that of the Venice Biennale, which has been in existence (with a few interruptions) since 1895. In the 50-odd national and few additional regional pavilions set up in the Giardini di Castello, single-artist shows predominate, mostly selected by state-sanctioned curators. Since 1980, the simultaneous Aperto show—originally held in the Arsenale, a former weapons factory, and now expanded to include exhibitions in several adjoining buildings and in the Giardini's Italian Pavilion-exposes premier work from both cutting-edge and established artists, regardless of nationality. It is perhaps the world's most prestigious group show.

The curator this year is Harald Szeemann, who launched Aperto, left, then came back and is now heading the whole Biennale. Aimed at providing a sort of humanistic overview, his theme is Plateau of Humankind. The artists range wildly, from the late German Fluxus titan Joseph Beuys and major American sculptor Richard Serra to such lesser-known quantities as 27-year-old South African performance artist Tracey Rose and Shanghai videomaker Zhen Xu, 24. The combination of the pavilion shows and Aperto's provocative juxtapositions ensures the Biennale unmatched firepower—and plenty of attention from the art world's top echelon. "Venice is the Oscars of the art world," says New York dealer Sean Kelly. "Nothing else compares to it."

Indeed, if a neutron bomb were to hit Venice during the three "professional days" that kick off the Biennale (which opens to the public on June 10 and runs through November 4 this year), the contemporary art world would essentially be annihilated. Virtually every serious artist, dealer, collector, critic and curator

makes the scene. This is a fabulous thing, especially for artists who don't yet have traction on the art world's New York-London axis. But there is a downside, too, as the social melee transforms the exhibits into a sort of hypercharged vernissage: great for seeing people, miserable for seeing art, especially subtle art.

Even before the Biennale opens, buzz reigns supreme. Among those to watch this year in the Aperto section are British artist Chris Cunningham, a music-video director segueing into the art world, whose work tends toward the graphic (read: pornographic) and whose September show at Anthony D'Offay in London was widely talked about. This year's Aperto seems to be pushing Scandinavian art in the way that the 1999 edition promoted China, so people are keen to see what kind of work comes from relative unknowns such as Sweden's Magnus Wallin, a computer animator, and Lars Siltberg, who makes videos, as well as from Finnish videomakers Heli Rekula, Salla Tykkd and Maaria Wirkkala. In the national pavilions, German installation artist Gregor Schneider is a controversial choice because of his age (many in Germany think him too young at 31) and his own country's debate over the merits of his art. Likewise, English video artist Mark Wallinger's work is bound to come under close scrutiny, since his selection marked a departure from the British Council's past play-it-safe policy. Coming off a well-received recent show at David Zwirner in New York and his inclusion in the London Royal Academy's hyped "Apocalypse" exhibition in the fall, Belgian painter Luc Tuymans is sure to draw attention as well.

But the beauty of the Venice Biennale lies in its very unpredictability. Once in Venice, logistics (and, sometimes, hangovers) preclude seeing everything. Thus, a harsh triage must be done. Buzz takes over again, spreading like wildfire over cocktails and through mobile-phone networks, shaping the paths of the cognoscenti as they make their rounds. "You only have three days, but the occasion is very social," explains Nicholas Logsdail of the Lisson Gallery in London. "Within a day, the word is out on what's good and what you can give a miss." Those who win in this word-of-mouth air war often reap their rewards quite quickly. Describing the prime mechanism for converting buzz to bucks, one art world *macher* jokes, "See it in Venice, buy it in Basel."

Given the prestige and contemporary art world credibility that Venice reaps from the Biennale, it's natural that other cities have launched their own biennials. Some, like Sao Paulo (founded in 1951, and next slated for October 2002) and Sydney (founded in 1973, next in May 2002), also play important market roles, literally putting artists on the map. For instance, the contemporary Chinese art specialist Shengtian Zheng, former director of the Art Beatus gallery in Vancouver, recalls a flurry of collectors and dealers calling after the Luo brothers—Luo Wei Bing, Luo Wei Dong and Luo Wei Guo—exposed their collaborative paintings at the 1998 Sao Paulo Bienal.

"Before Sao Paulo, they were not even really in the art market. Nobody saw their work much," says Zheng. "Afterward, they showed at the Lehmann Maupin gallery in Manhattan, the New York Times commissioned a piece, and their prices went up roughly 70 percent." The large-format Luo works now fetch up to $10,000.

The newer biennials in Lyon (founded 1991, opening June 23) and Berlin (founded 1998, next scheduled for April 2003) have established themselves as places to spot newcomers, allowing sharp-eyed collectors to buy in on the ground floor. "It used to be that biennials were an acclamation after an artist had gallery and museum shows; today it's the opposite," observes Francesco Bonami, who was a curator for the 1995 Venice Biennale and is now a curator at the Museum of Contemporary Art in Chicago. "The biennials are like a display window: Artists do the tour of biennials and then land in galleries."

With the Venice Biennale and the Art Basel fair (June 13 through 18) opening in quick succession this year, some lucky artists even get the "echo effect" of being everywhere art market travelers turn for almost a month. This year, for instance, Belgian artist Francis Alys, who lives in Mexico City, is releasing a pair of peacocks in the Giardini di Castello as part of Aperto. He is also showing works with both Galerie Peter Kilchmann and Lisson Gallery at Art Basel.

While it's hard to argue against the existence of any particular biennial, it's easy to realize that at some point—either present or imminent—there are just going to be too many damn biennials. "There's starting to be a backlash against the new ones," points out Thilo Wermke of Galerie Neu in Berlin. "I think it makes people actually value Venice even more, because it's the original." Naturally, Wermke is delighted to have such Galerie Neu artists as Berlin sculptor and installation artist Manfred Pernice chosen for this year's Aperto. But he's not lobbying every far-flung biennial's curator to include Galerie Neu artists. "It's just not necessary to put my artists out there like some kind of traveling circus," he explains.

If that seems harsh, consider this fact: While biennials have proliferated worldwide, the critical mass of the art market still lies firmly in the U.S. and Western Europe. Thus, the people who visit biennials tend to hail from these two regions, creating a family-reunion vibe even in remote, exotic locales. "I think a lot of the biennials are just like an art version of soccer tourism," says Daniel Voyant of Galerie Metropolis in Lyon, who fears that their proliferation may have a nefarious effect on the art production they are supposed to celebrate: "When you take artists from all over the world and put them on the biennial circuit, it's inevitable that over time the art will become homogenous," he explains. "Even if the artists continue living in Africa or Asia, soon they're more influenced by biennials than by their homeland."

The other problem is supply and demand. Clearly, the appetite for great new art has sorely outstripped the emergence of great new artists. (This shouldn't come as a surprise—after all, today any discerning gallery-hopper considers it astounding to enjoy half of what's showing at any given moment in Hoxton or Chelsea.) Logically, this paucity of sources presents the lesser biennials with two options: Either show mediocre work—a difficult but sometimes unavoidable option for a venue that is meant to embody the appetite for great new art—or mount shows that echo other biennials.

There's a lot of the latter going on. Consider the biennial curriculum vitae of Russian conceptual art duo Igor and Svetlana Kopystiansky: Venice Aperto (1988), Sydney (1992), Sao Paulo (1994), Istanbul (1995), Lyon (1997),

Johannesburg (1997) and Liverpool (1999). If that seems a little intense, it's almost languid by comparison with Alys, who participated in the Sao Paulo Bienal in 1998, then Venice, Istanbul and Melbourne in 1999, followed last year by the Havana and Uppsala, Sweden, biennials and an exhibition in Montreal. The artist returns to Venice and shows up in Basel in June.

FOR ARTISTS LUCKY enough to end up in Venice, the three "professional days" of wine and poses can transform their lives, especially for those working farthest from the art world's capitals. "Before 1999, [painter] Qiu Shihua's work was not so well-received, even in China," recalls Shengtian Zheng. "He had a gallery in Hong Kong, Han Art, but he was not shown in museums. Then he was chosen for Aperto. After that, he was asked to do a show at the Kunsthalle Basel, was invited for other solo shows and collectors started commissioning large pieces." Appearing in Aperto essentially hot-wired Qiu's career in Europe, allowing him to bypass the system of regional museums and minor galleries through which local painters have to rise.

Even in Germany—hardly a marginal art market—the Venice Biennale's market-making power ranks supreme. That's partly because the country's contemporary art world is fragmented between Cologne, Berlin, Munich and Dusseldorf. "In Germany, getting selected for the national pavilion at the Venice Biennale is somewhat like being granted an aristocratic title," says Galerie Neu's Wermke. Aperto is almost equally important. "A lot of people were unsure about [Hamburg conceptual artist] Andreas Slominski," recalls Wermke. "Then, when his work was in the Aperto four years ago, it was a catalyst for his career." Before Aperto, Slominski had no gallery in New York; afterward he ended up at Metro Pictures, his prices tripled, rising as high as $150,000 in the process. In addition, he got commissions from the Prada Foundation and a solo show at the Guggenheim Museum's Berlin branch. "His art had not changed so much from before his showing in Aperto," Wermke explains. "It's just that many people don't trust their own opinions, and the higher a position they hold in a museum or gallery, the more often that seems to be true." More recently, Wermke points to German performance artist John Bock, represented by Galerie Klosterfelde in Berlin, who went in less than a year from an Aperto slot in 1999 to performing four of his lecture-style events in New York, to solid critical effect, as part of the "Projects" series at the Museum of Modern Art. "Aperto was a big step for him, especially because so many Americans come there," recalls Klosterfelde's Lena Kiessler. "We saw the same thing with another of our artists: Christian Jankowski, who got his first show in America, at the Wadsworth Athenaeum in Hartford, from the same Aperto."

Berlin gallerist Max Hetzler echoes Wermke's point, recalling the tremendous impact of the 1990 Aperto on two artists he represents, Jeff Koons and Thomas Struth. For Koons, who was at the height of his market, the impact was mostly to solidify, even crown, his already considerable notoriety. "People still talk about the 'Venice' paintings of Jeff Koons, because he first showed the 'Cicciolina' series there," Hetzler says, referring to works inspired by the artist's ex-wife, an Italian porn star. "And that was also where Struth showed his 'museum' photos for the first time." For Struth, the event marked a tremendous turning point. Three months later, pieces from that series—photos of people looking at art—

were exhibited at the Marian Goodman Gallery in New York, which helped disseminate his work to major collections all over the U.S. Before Venice, the photos were selling for roughly $6,000. Now they go for more like $80,000 to $100,000 on the primary market, and as much as $200,000 at auction.

For British and American artists, Venice's impact is some what reduced these days, because the current celebrity status accorded young artists in New York and London means that barely nascent talents become the subject of glossy magazine profiles and gallery bidding wars. Venues in those cities also provide powerful international platforms, as the art world's players make regular pilgrimages there. "In Britain, being selected to show at the Tate Modern has become the huge thing," notes London independent curator Felicity Lunn, formerly of Whitechapel Art Gallery. "You're being seen in an international context, beside major artists. In the same way, a solo show at MoMA could be even bigger than being selected to the Venice Biennale."

Still, that's not to say that Venice can't matter to the U.K.'s renowned artists. Videomaker Douglas Gordon's prices at the Lisson Gallery have tripled, now ranging up to $200,000, since his Aperto appearance in 1997, and the pavilions can prove equally valuable. "For Tony Cragg and Anish Kapoor, the British Pavilion shows [in 1988 and 1990, respectively] really took their careers to another level," says Logsdail. Declining to cite figures, the dealer notes that Cragg's pavilion show was entirely sold before the Biennale opened to the public; Kapoor's work eventually ended up an hour away at the Prada Foundation in Milan.

But for all its market might, Venice doesn't always mean money in the bank. "For a late-career artist with few innovative ideas, it won't do much good," Logsdail continues. "A lot of it comes down to timing. If the selection comes too late, especially when a career is already very established, often it seems that there is less incentive for an artist to take risks."

Historically, both Britain and the U.S. have chosen well-established artists. "The British Council chooses people at a certain stage of their careers, who are 'presentable,' meaning their work won't shock people so much," says Lunn. The selection of Leon Kossof in 1995 and Rachel Whiteread in 1997 certainly reflected that trend, though recent choices, like Gary Hume in 1999 and especially Mark Wallinger this year, may be a sign of greater risk-taking. In the U.S., Robert Gober was hardly a daring choice, nor was Ann Hamilton in 1999. Both have long track records and a solid base of collectors and curators who back them. Such safe selections dilute the power of the pavilions, argue some art world observers. "The effect of Venice on an artist's career depends a lot on where they stand beforehand," says Zurich contemporary dealer Peter Kilchmann. "When the American committee chooses someone like Robert Gober, it's not that important. But to a young unknown artist—like animator Magnus Wallin this year—being chosen for Aperto by Harald Szeemann has a huge impact."

IN THE COMPETITION for Venice's imprimatur, the playing field is hardly level. For every littleknown artist from a developing country who is "discovered"

in Venice, there's an artist whose exceptional work gets shorted by the crowds because it is too "quiet" or time-demanding. "The quality of experience is mitigated when you have 3,000 people in a supersteamy room trying to watch a video piece," Sean Kelly says. "I remember one year there was a torrential downpour when I went to see Doug Aitken's [video] Electric Earth. The exhibition spaces were full of people opening and closing umbrellas, drenched in sweat and talking in loud voices. There's just no way a more meditative work can stand up in that sort of environment." Luckily for Aitken, the judges who awarded him the 1999 Golden Lion had managed to avoid the madding crowds.

At a financial level, too, Venice has certain inherent injustices. Tipping the scales in favor of the art world's incumbent powers, prosperous galleries often invest heavily in their artists, when they have been selected, to maximize the Biennale's marketing opportunity. For instance Art Beatus, which represented Cai Guo Qlang, helped find sponsorship for the artist's installation Venice Rent Collector's Courtyard, with which he won the 1999 Aperto's International Prize. When video artist Rodney Graham was chosen for the 1997 Canadian pavilion, Logsdail, his dealer, invested some £100,000 ($168,000) to help produce the work and throw a party in Graham's honor. Likewise, Kelly invested heavily in the installation that Ann Hamilton, whom he represents, created for the American pavilion in 1999, and also lined up Gucci to underwrite the installation as well as the dinner in her honor. The result was a widely discussed, lavishly minimalist space that benefited from high production values and cemented Hamilton's spot in art history books. Kelly prefers not to discuss specific figures, but he says that Hamilton's work showed a "significant" rise in value afterward. He notes that the installation led to commissions and an upcoming museum show in Japan, and that the artist has been selected to work with renowned Dutch architect Rem Koolhaas on a commission for an upcoming building project. Interestingly, since this year's American representative, Gober, renounced gallery representation a couple of years ago, he had to find another funding mechanism, issuing a special print to subsidize part of his Venice pavilion costs and avoid corporate sponsorship.

Despite his success with Hamilton, Kelly says he'd like to see all the pavilions work with a similar budget. "Because the pavilions have no budget from the Biennale, right now you have tremendous inequities between the artists," the dealer admits. "Personally, I'd prefer for there to be the same budget for each pavilion. That would be fairer." Every year, of course, despite access to funds, some artists simply blow it, unable to handle the pressure or to adapt their work to the dimensions of their national pavilion. "The classic mistake is to think of Venice as a sanctification, and then to try and do something spectacular," says Bonami. "For example, people take a piece that's meant for a monitor and project it on a screen, just because it's the Biennale. I'd say Bill Viola overdid it in 1995. Last time, Roman Signer in the Swiss pavilion just didn't translate in that context, and the Jason Rhoades installation in the Danish pavilion overshadowed all the other artists. It just didn't work." Obviously, blowing it in Venice is a major mistake. By definition, you never get invited back to the national pavilion, and Aperto tends to seek new blood, not dole out second chances to past failures.

For all its power as a star maker, Venice isn't much of an actual marketplace. In large part, that's because everyone knows that the opening of Art Basel is just a

week away, offering a sort of reverse-image Venice: The logistics are easy, the dealers are easily tracked down, and talking money is no faux pas. And the timing of the Basel fair isn't accidental. For while Venice does not spike Basel's overall attendance much, it certainly guarantees a high VIP count. The favorite phrase an Art Basel gallerist enjoys purring? "Surely you saw the work by [insert gallery artist's name here] in Venice last week?"

Some gallerists, such as Kelly, frown upon such tactics as gauche, preferring to let the artist's reputation build after Venice by not rushing his or her works to market. Now, that may hold true for artists such as Gober, whose market is well established and poised only to rise. But given the market volatility of avant-garde work, the names of Aperto curator Szeemann's choices are likely to echo mightily all over the contemporary gallery ghetto in the first floor of the Messe Basel. Failing some major miscue, you can expect such verge-of-stardom artists as Dutch installation crew Atelier van Lieshout and British multimedia artist Gavin Turk to be hot commodities in Basel, their already strong European buzz reinforced by Venice's stamp of approval—both have works in the Aperto.

Thus, although Aperto is by far the junior partner in the Venice Biennale, it could be reasonably argued that it carries more weight than the national pavilions. For one thing, the pavilions are a hodgepodge of artists chosen by wildly different committees, using manifestly different standards and working with ludicrously different budgets. Or, as one New York dealer puts it, "It's patchy, like a world's fair. There's lots of shit in Venice—the Julian Schnabels of Poland and so forth."

Although this may be a crude assessment, it's certainly true that the national pavilions are an apples-and-oranges affair. Case in point: Germany's Schneider and Britain's Wallinger, who may represent relatively risky choices for their countries' pavilions, but are internationally renowned artists. Wallinger has shown repeatedly in the U.S., exposed in a half-dozen other biennials, was short-listed for the Turner Prize and included in the notorious "Sensation" show that debuted at the Royal Academy of Arts in 1997. Less widely acclaimed, Schneider's installation work also appeared at the Tate Modern in 1998, and his works have made the rounds of Europe. These artists' neighbors in the Giardini di Castello pavilions include Latvia's Ilmars Blumbergs , a 58-year-old artist with a string of Baltic prizes in book and costume design. (What's more, the whole idea of a national pavilion, frankly, seems ever more antediluvian as artists go global at earlier and earlier stages of their career.)

Younger, more cutting-edge artists in Aperto derive a huge branding benefit from Szeemann's standing as the art world's independent curator par excellence. The only thing that compares might be Documenta—the Kassel, Germany, contemporary art event that started in 1955 and now takes place every five years—but dealers tend to downplay Documenta's effect on the market, both because of its infrequency and because it doesn't draw quite as many big-money collectors. Also, unlike Documenta or any other such event, the Aperto section's artist list has historically been a fluid document, mutating almost until the last minute and creating a heightened dramatic tension over unexpected last-minute additions.

In that sense it's all very Italian. Perhaps some of the Venice Biennale's magic comes from the very fact that it takes place in such an ethereal, enchanting spot. And while being in Italy may complicate innumerable logistical issues, it also means that there's a certain room for freestyling. Thus, when artist Marina Abramovic was suddenly barred from appearing in Yugoslavia's pavilion in 1997 by the minister for culture, Kelly scrambled to bring her video installation Balkan Baroque to Venice. "We only got her in at the last moment, buried in the basement of the Italian pavilion," recalls the dealer. "It was a huge struggle for her work to appear at all. But then she won the first prize and ended up showing in the Hirshhorn Museum. From Venice onward she was cast in gold."

MARC SPIEGLER is a contributing editor of *Art & Auction*.