

On the 59th Venice Biennale: A Critical Perspective on Hidden Clues

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Abstract: A grand global art event since the 19th Century, the Venice Biennale has pushed the envelope in many areas of art, to some extent reaching its peak in 2022. Tackling themes of feminism, identity politics, and mysticism, the 59th Venice Biennale takes on an appearance different from the past with strong themes and comparatively weak national pavilions. This paper comments on the diversity and anti-anthropocentrism of the displays, with an insight into hidden clues that can date back to the evolution in contemporary art a few decades ago, and reflects on the role and significance of the event critically.

Keywords: The 59th Venice Biennale, Anti-anthropocentrism, Clues, Critique.

1. Introduction

The Venice Biennale[1], a grand international art event, took on its “novel” appearance after being postponed for a year. Critiques on the fair vary, though all hold rather tempered perspectives or reflections. This paper proposes that the 59th Venice Biennale marks the victory of the Western current political correctness, and newly emerging watershed of development in global contemporary art.

Titled *The Milk of Dreams*[2], 213 artists from 58 countries gathered at the 59th Venice Biennale, reflecting on the unpredictability and possibilities of the contemporary moment, exploring how the definition of humanity is constantly evolving.[3] Among 10 must-see shows from the 2022 edition, including award-winning sculptures from the American national pavilion and a large-scale video installation that draws connections between humans and nature, the clues and themes in the 59th Venice Biennale recall the twists and paradoxes of the ongoing renewal in contemporary art after the 1950s.[3] Although some critiques hold that this exhibition marks a breakthrough in the theme, this paper views the spotlight on American artist Simone Leigh as continuing to symbolize the deep integration of politics and art display.

From the avant-garde to Neo avant-garde, critical debates in form and aesthetics, and recent controversies in politics and contemporary practice, the Venice Biennale has witnessed so much. “Given all that, *The Milk of Dreams* was something of a revelation. And in more ways than one.”[4] Just as importantly, the event this time paid much attention to its design[5] as well as curatorial direction [6]. To many audiences, the splattered exhibitions foretell the image of this diverse and broken world, on the brink of cataclysm. In fact, the display delicately achieves the careful balancing act of orienting visitors, who, by being allowed to imagine possibilities, are encouraged to orient themselves. For those who attended the event during its preview, they were pushed to ask questions such as “What do you think?” and “What was the best thing?” from the moment they arrived—penetrating even though hidden beneath the hoodie-masks, already busily constructing and strengthening the latest iteration of the art world’s overarching consensus and FOMO [7] culture. This culture in itself is another, albeit less delicate, balance between orienting and being oriented.[8] This orientation may

be effective, but it is little in such a modern and complex event.

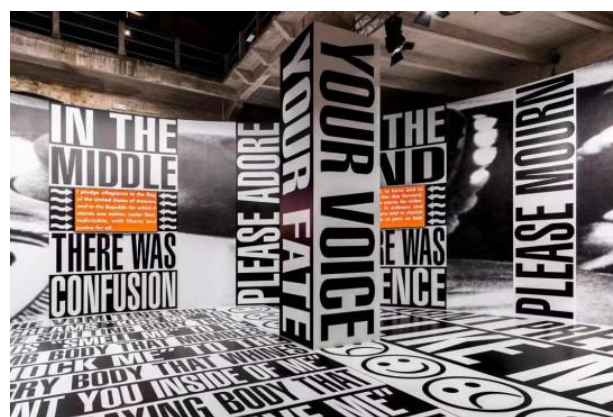


Figure 1. Barbara Kruger, *Untitled* (Beginning/Middle/End), 2022, site-specific installation, print on vinyl, three-channel video installation (on 3 flatscreen monitors), sound, in *The Milk of Dreams*, 59th Venice Biennale, 2022. Photo: Roberto Marossi; courtesy La Biennale di Venezia [8]

As argued by some critics, “this is a show that triumphantly emphasises fluidity despite the Biennale’s institutional fixity”[8]. Particularly in the densely stocked Central Pavilion, it’s easy to notice a nagging sense that all this presents us with, indeed, an illusion. Thus, it may arouse a sense of fantasy and contemporary surrealism in the delivery and acceptance of the artworks. This illusion is coupled with a sense of overwhelming distance, erased time, and a vague consciousness that sways, whereas in reality it is only reality that is far away. To some extent, Art, as implied here, belongs more fully than one might like to the realm of dreams. As for the illusion, the role the artists and designers play in the exhibition are not merely that of art creators. Instead, they have become thinkers, advocates and activists, and are in a sense greatly influenced by the curators and organizers as well. There is much that has happened and awaits happening this year, with uncertainties and ongoing crises. They all cast light onto reality—our current reality with missiles, aggression and intolerance from Tonga to Japan, the United States, China, India, Palestine, Ukraine, and everywhere else imaginable. Reality is geopolitical chaos and confusing global puzzles. “For all that this exhibition is predicated, with its fetish for

painting and sculpture, on art that is solid and tangible (at the expense of new media in its various forms), there's nevertheless a sense that it might melt into air.”[8] Is it not an irony that the fantasy and illusion of the displays will all wind up in disappearance? We have no answer by far.

When we carefully comb through the design of the Biennale, clear meaning and indication is given, especially to newcomers to the lagoon. A brief primer goes like this: The Venice Biennale is a show of two halves. On the one hand, it comprises a principal international exhibition with this year's the 59th edition; the first was in 1895.[9] Most often in the history and present, needless to say, these pavilions present solo exhibitions. Many of Venice's museums time their biggest shows to open during the Biennale. Simultaneously, the other half goes to a wide array of dealers, foundations, and chancers who rent out canal-side palazzi for pop-up exhibitions, and these places range from museum-quality to cash-and-carry. Development over a few decades has enabled the Venice Biennale to welcome more astonishing artworks, political ideas and curatorial intentions, putting on a feast on its stage. However, the emphasis on leftists, or hidden collaborations with the left-leaning art organizers has strengthened the profound changes in the curatorial mindset and the writing of documents and literature, leaving acute impact on the displays held ever after.

The main show this year, organized by Cecilia Alemani, an Italian-born New Yorker, is absolutely a tightly argued and successful exhibition, and its intentions are obvious enough to be in the center of campaign and discussion. “Her feminist, surrealist and ecological approach has produced a coherent and challenging show, whose optimistic vision of emancipation through imagination feels very rare nowadays.”[10] The native element, respect of traditions, as well as insight on a future eroded with cyborgs and data spill over at the scene. It's difficult to unveil whether the meaning is likely to be well received by the masses. Plus, the fact is that an overwhelming majority of the participants are women, and the key themes are surrealism, cyborgism, animal and plant life.[12] However, after observing the themes and artworks in detail, it appears timely to trace the route of the debate from a few decades ago.



Figure 2. Seduction of the Cyborg, in The Milk of Dreams, 59th Venice Biennale, 2022. Photo: Roberto Marossi; courtesy La Biennale di Venezia [11]

“I'm not quite sure what it says about America that one of the most intense public controversies in the months between the Tiananmen Square ... and the breaching of the Berlin Wall had to do with homoerotic photographs and a crucifix

suspended in a vat of urine.”

Representative Henry Hyde, Republican of Illinois,

“The Culture War,” National Review April 30, 1990[13]

Clues related to art reform are hidden in the political turmoils of America, the first launched at the end of the Second World War, and the second the dramatic post-70s, with intense change ever after in its political climate.

Let us first examine the Culture Wars and its background. Moynihan's query is one thing worthy of attention, recognizing the degree to which the absence of a foreign conflict tended to lead the right toward an increasingly aggressive and polarized policing of the domestic sphere, and it did so in an strong attempt to solidify its power. The reason for that is the right's central aims and discourse of defensive containment has long required threatening “others” to define itself against. This was most spectacularly and evidently the case following American overwhelming victory in World War II with the rise of McCarthyism during the early Cold War era. “Indeed, in an eerie foreshadowing of the late 1980s, the policing of the arts (albeit largely the performing arts and film) through the blacklist and a concomitant federal crackdown on gays and lesbians throughout the so-called Lavender scare had been central tenants of cold war-era McCarthyism.”[13]

As put by the commentators, the Culture Wars was in large part a direct response to a new player on the political scene, one that had come to signify as Moynihan's embodiment of evil – it is exactly a newly militant gay and lesbian community. [13] Since the late 1980s, the phrase Culture Wars has become a kind of shorthand and paradox. The reason for this comes to describing that particular constellation of forces: “the Christian right political agenda, more moderate Republican appeasement, the National Endowment for the Arts, the cultural avant-garde, the gay and lesbian rights movement, and AIDS activism—which resulted in a policing of the visual arts not dissimilar from the policing of the popular arts under McCarthyism.”[13] The political battles in America brought great quakes to its art world, and the turmoil still hampers the normalization of the trend in art selection. It has worked the same in the Biennale where the USA leads the trend as always. Sometimes, the identities art makers hold have become the determinant of access to the grand art fair, with a set of mature techniques, appealing pleas and active supporters inside or outside the central art world.

In a catechism eerily reminiscent of the “commie, pinko fag” terminology of the 1950s, it is easy to see the ideological work the homosexual has long been called upon to do. What they had done for the right was in constituting a pervasive domestic threat just as foreign threats recede. Despite all that “the arts establishment was at pains to recast and contain the Mapplethorpe debate from a dangerous public referendum on homosexuality into a less off-putting narrative of a group of country bumpkins presuming to talk about art, all the while in service to naked political haymaking. Even as they attacked the Corcoran's cancellation of the exhibit, for example, the Washington Post's editorial board denied that homophobia was a significant factor.”[13] In fact, it implied that the exterior threats stir the self-protectionism among the society, echoing the atmosphere where attention to the minorities and the social justice is increasing, shedding light on the contemporary world.



Figure 3. Works by Ali Cherri in *The Milk of Dreams*, 59th Venice Biennale, 2022. Photo: Roberto Marossi; courtesy La Biennale di Venezia [14]

The early years of the Reagan administration favored, it seems, a more sophisticated stratagem which emphasizes the appropriation and reworking of a common visual vocabulary. The language of the art catered to the embrace of consumption and “happiness”. This conclusion may be detected in Warhol’s repetitive use of Da Vinci’s *Last Supper*, or Sherrie Levine’s rephotographings and parody of famous photographs. Needless to say, these historical images were unavoidably filled both with their own original historical insight and their utility to the present, and were made over into commentary alongside meaning circulation. This means “they were an implicit critique of more normative forms of aesthetic originality, which sought instead to produce itself—falsely—as self-generated.”[15] Simone Leigh’s works undoubtedly prove the point that artistic victory belongs to the implications of the American political correctness, both in identity and connection to social issues. Some artworks are here designed for those who are forgotten in art history. Repetition of concerns aforementioned in display, the artists and artworks at the Venice Biennale this year gained unique status. This phenomena represents the triumph of the historical motive as discussed here—the impact of Culture Wars and the art.

When recalling the early 1980s, a winking acknowledgment of complicity, or namely, cahoots in the “always already”[16] takes its place, being defined as a more foursquare, more realistic, and in a sense more intellectually agile comprehension of the conditions of meaning-making. “At its best, this admission of an inescapable imbrication became a critique of easy identity politics; at its worst, it could slip into the aesthetic equivalent of ‘whoever dies with the most toys wins,’”[17] which means its cynical tone steps in sync with the Reagan administration’s slow decline in economics. The author argues that decaying in capitalism and aesthetics can be regarded as the roots and also the results of the confusing Culture Wars, hastening the speed of art’s degradation at the Biennale.

The Culture Wars were about the end of the regime of silence that had for generations governed gay and lesbian art, not to mention lives and other minority groups. The stress on the memory intertwined with matrix, myth, imaginations and immigration feature the design and the artworks partly included in the event. Half figurative and half transcendental in style, they express a sense of anxiety and reflection. “Alternatively understood as the closet, as maintaining aspects of oppression, or as a postmodernist decentering of the authorial voice and carrying the promise of liberation, the

valence of the voice was perhaps the central issue in queer art in the eighties. As long as gayness remained in the realm of the readerly, aided and abetted by both gay artists and gay critics who could—and did—self-camouflage as intellectually and ideologically more pure and sophisticated than crude self disclosure, gay art could flourish unmolested in the US.”[19] The context applies the same in Creolization and hybridity, which are important terms in the comprehension of the complexities of race and ethnicity. Emphasis on global black community originates in the discourses of multiculturalism in America, linking to the rise in academia of postcolonial theory since the 1980s. As a result, the American art world in the 1980s and 1990s was dominated by “multicultural” exhibitions and events, especially the notorious 1993 Whitney Biennial which marked a watershed in the influence of discourses of multiculturalism on American art. Ironically, it also indicated the end of this influence, as argued by some scholars that the art world began to retreat from the challenges posed by multiculturalism in the mid-1990s, instead turning to more autonomous and natural aesthetic concerns, rejecting the political concerns which had dominated the production and interpretation of visual artworks since the 1970s. However, these clues seem to be present even now. For instance, Black Power’s revolutionary attitude had a major impact on debates about black identity and the visual arts. It can be predicted that the next Venice Biennale, in many ways possible, will put itself on the track of the display of all minority groups, or that only themes that seem to be decentering and anti-anthropocentric will be given consideration.



Figure 4. Works by Paula Rego in *The Milk of Dreams*, 59th Venice Biennale, 2022. Photo: Roberto Marossi; courtesy La Biennale di Venezia [18]

The attention to secrecy, naturalism and aboriginal culture constitutes a majority of the artworks on display, which is one of the byproducts of the Culture Wars and confusing thoughts in art making since the 1980s. The metaphysics for the base of this event has rotted and degraded into chaos of post-contemporary context, or a situation we cannot define anymore. Are human beings supposed to turn to their own timid imagination, where flocks of groups yell for support that is over corrected by the leftists and advocates of the radicals? What is the right way for humanity? Nevertheless, it may be pessimistic to judge the reality in the art world without heading back to the near future.



Figure 5. Precious Okoyomon, *To See The Earth Before the End of the World*, 2022, in *The Milk of Dreams*, 59th Venice Biennale, 2022. Photo: Roberto Marossi; courtesy La Biennale di Venezia[20]

Back to the stage, though the national pavilions are in a comparatively humble position this year, there are actually some good artworks representing the nations, and no direct response to the theme. “The truth is that the pavilion component of biennial culture in Venice has proved useful. Pavilions have allowed the problematization of both spectacle and the ethic state, because artists of established cultural capital (such as Haacke) are allowed free rein to deploy their experiential aesthetics within them. Until the curtain closes on the larger theater of nations and geopolitics, biennials and national pavilions will continue to have conceptual and political roles to play...This is where I leave you with a final provocation from my own politics of biennial culture. I want to be honest in admitting that I think biennials are an excellent way to pursue ‘politics by other means.’”[21] Here the politics refer to the strategic realms employed by certain departments in collaboration with America’s art promotions goals.

As a tool for great power propaganda since the Cold War, and serving as the Colosseum for artists and dealers catering to the contemporary art market, “The experience-seeking subject that these exhibitions have helped to produce is thus responsible for making judgments, but also for weighing the larger implications and longer histories of such encounters.”[21] In each Venice Biennale, the artworks and display designs are out there speaking for themselves, the intentions of the curators and the institutions lagging behind. Besides, theme, national cultural image and art are closely knitted in the Biennial. It has to remain an open question just how much post-modernism theory has played a part in the moves which were made in the 1980s to decentralize curatorial activity till now. Additionally, it is also to open up a group of Western galleries and museums to art practices beyond the West with art produced by minorities in the West itself. Nonetheless it is easy to unravel the fact that moving beyond earlier endeavors to represent and retrieve “otherness” via positive or basic imagery tends to be effective, and the impact of postmodernism theory can also be found in the shift to various manners of art-thinking. But the irony is that Said’s interpretation of a form of interference and Spivak’s interpretation of the modes of reinscription recount the history and explain the displays with international competence confining to their own setbacks.

We cannot deny the role the Biennale plays in the world of art, nor are we supposed to overestimate the importance of the display, given the existence of factors irrelevant to pure art. Essentially, there is the problem of the subjective voice,

however personalized or universalized, and the puzzle of how it might contribute to an unconscious automatization which is complementary to the Biennale and its reinforcement in art’s globalization. “Necessary in our present world, biennials are also necessary for questioning their own necessity. Spectacles to consume but not be consumed by, biennials and biennial culture must now include ruminating while renting rooms, critically reflecting while chatting, and—for artists, curators, and visitors alike—understanding the continuity of our desires for the world picture.”[21] Talking about continuity, people have no idea whether art and the Biennale will end. There’s no doubt that the world and the Venice Biennale are all changing, alongside the visible trajectories where the polarization and radicalism take the upper hand. When applied to art, this emphasis on subjectivity can result in the assumption that postmodernism and even anti-anthropocentrism modes of art have a changing, or alternative, status, for they are wrought in the turmoil and heat of minority history, and cooled in the presumed perspective of certain memory. Only time will tell where the exhibition is going, and what destiny art and humanity are heading towards.

Acknowledgment

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References and notes

- [1] In this paper, “the Biennale” refers to the 59th Venice Biennale, similarly hereinafter.
- [2] The name comes from Surrealist artist Leonora Carrington’s fantastical book *The Milk of Dreams*, in which she describes “a magical world where life is constantly re-envisioned through the prism of the imagination...”.
- [3] <https://aestheticamagazine.com/pavilions-of-change-venice-biennale-2022/>, 08/05/2022. Also see Lloyd, Fran, ed. *Displacement and Difference: Contemporary Arab Visual Culture in the Diaspora*, London: Saffron Books, 2001; Preziosi, Donald, ed. *The Art of Art History*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999.
- [4] <https://artreview.com/59th-venice-biennale-review-revelation-and-illusion/>, 05/05/2022.
- [5] It is designed by Italy’s Studio Formafantasma.
- [6] Here it refers to Italy’s Cecilia Alemani.
- [7] FOMO refers to fear of missing out, the feeling of apprehension that one is either not in the know or missing out on information, events, experiences, or life decisions that could make one’s life better, as explained on Wikipedia, https://en.m.wikipedia.org/wiki/Fear_of_missing_out, 10/05/2022.
- [8] <https://artreview.com/59th-venice-biennale-review-revelation-and-illusion/>, 05/05/2022. Also see Brennan, Teresa, and Martin Jay, eds. *Vision in Context: Historical and Contemporary Perspectives on Sight*, London: Routledge, 1996; Elkins, James, *Visual Studies: A Skeptical Introduction*, London: Routledge, 2002; Jay, Martin (1988). “Scopic Regimes

- of Modernity.” In Foster, ed.(1988).——(1993). *Downcast Eyes: The Denigration of Vision in Twentieth-Century French Thought*, Berkeley: University of California Press.
- [9] It takes contemporary art’s temperature, along with more than 90 pavilions where nations organize their own shows.
- [10] <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/04/21/arts/design/venice-biennale.html>, 07/05/2022.
- [11] <https://artreview.com/59th-venice-biennale-review-revelation-and-illusion/>, 05/05/2022.
- [12] There are also very fine new paintings in the main show by the New Yorkers Amy Sillman and Jacqueline Humphries, with the final works of Kaari Upson, and fascinating historical inclusions of overlooked 20th century figures, many Italian, all women, refer to <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/04/21/arts/design/venice-biennale.html>.
- [13] Jonathan D. Katz, “ ‘The Senators Were Revolted’: Homophobia and the Culture Wars” In *A Companion to Contemporary Art since 1945*, ed. Amelia Jones, Oxford:Blackwell Publishing, 2006, pp.233-239.
- [14] <https://artreview.com/59th-venice-biennale-review-revelation-and-illusion/>, 05/05/2022.
- [15] Jonathan D. Katz, “ ‘The Senators Were Revolted’: Homophobia and the Culture Wars” In *A Companion to Contemporary Art since 1945*, ed. Amelia Jones, Oxford:Blackwell Publishing, 2006, pp.242. Also see Scott, Derrick, “Jungle Fever? Black Gay Identity Politics, White Dick and the Utopian Bedroom.” In *Queer Theory Sociology*, ed. Steven Seidman, Oxford:Blackwell, 1996; Conerly, Gregory, “Are You Black First Or Are You Queer?” In *The Greatest Taboo:Homosexuality in Black Communities*, ed. Delroy Constantine-Simms, Los Angeles: Alyson Publications, 2001.
- [16] Here it refers to the postmodern sense of everything existing as a simulation or as a reproduction of something else equally non-original.
- [17] Jonathan D. Katz, “ ‘The Senators Were Revolted’: Homophobia and the Culture Wars” In *A Companion to Contemporary Art since 1945*, ed. Amelia Jones, Oxford:Blackwell Publishing, 2006, pp.242-243.
- [18] <https://artreview.com/59th-venice-biennale-review-revelation-and-illusion/>, 05/05/2022.
- [19] Jonathan D. Katz, “ ‘The Senators Were Revolted’: Homophobia and the Culture Wars” In *A Companion to Contemporary Art since 1945*, ed. Amelia Jones, Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2006, pp.243. Also see Araeen, Rasheed, “From Primitivism to Ethnic Arts.” In *The Myth of Primitivism*, ed. Susan Hiller, London: Routledge, 1987; Fusco, Coco, “Pan-American Post-Nationalism:Another World Order.” In *Black Popular Culture*, ed. Michele Wallace, Seattle: Bay Press, 1992; Hiller, Susan, *The Myth of Primitivism*, London and New York: Routledge, 1991.
- [20] <https://artreview.com/59th-venice-biennale-review-revelation-and-illusion/>, 05/05/2022.
- [21] Caroling A. Jones, “Biennial Culture: A Longer History”, in *The Biennial Reader:An Anthology on Large-scale Perennial Exhibitions of Contemporary Art*, eds. Elena Filipovic, Marieke Van Hal et al., Bergen Kunsthall, Hatje Cantz press, 2010, pp.83-85. Available: <https://arts.berkeley.edu/wp-content/uploads/2016/01/Jones-Biennial-Culture.pdf>. Also see Sussman, Elizabeth, Thelma Golden, John Hanhardt, and Lisa Phillips, 1993 *Biennial Exhibition*, New York: Whitney Museum of America Art, 1993; Wollen, Peter, and Lynne Cooke, eds. *Visual Display: Culture Beyond Appearances*, New York: The New Press, 1999.