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ART REVIEW

Another Venice Biennale Shuffles to Life

By ROBERTA SMITH

VENICE, June 15 — When it comes to big, international art exhibitions, the Venice Biennale has something none of the others can match: the brilliant, seductive artwork that is the city itself. The city's ancient sights and pleasures, as much as the promise of any insight into contemporary art, draw art-world professionals from around the globe to this fabled archipelago in just-happy-to-be-here droves.

They have arrived once more, this time for the opening of the 1997 Venice Biennale. They have filled hotels, bars and restaurants. They have gathered in shifting clusters on wide piazzas and in narrow passageways, consulting maps, trading opinions and comparing grueling art-show itineraries. Two more big international shows open in Germany at the end of this week — Documenta X in Kassel and "Sculpture Projects '97" in Münster — and the words "forced march" have been uttered frequently.

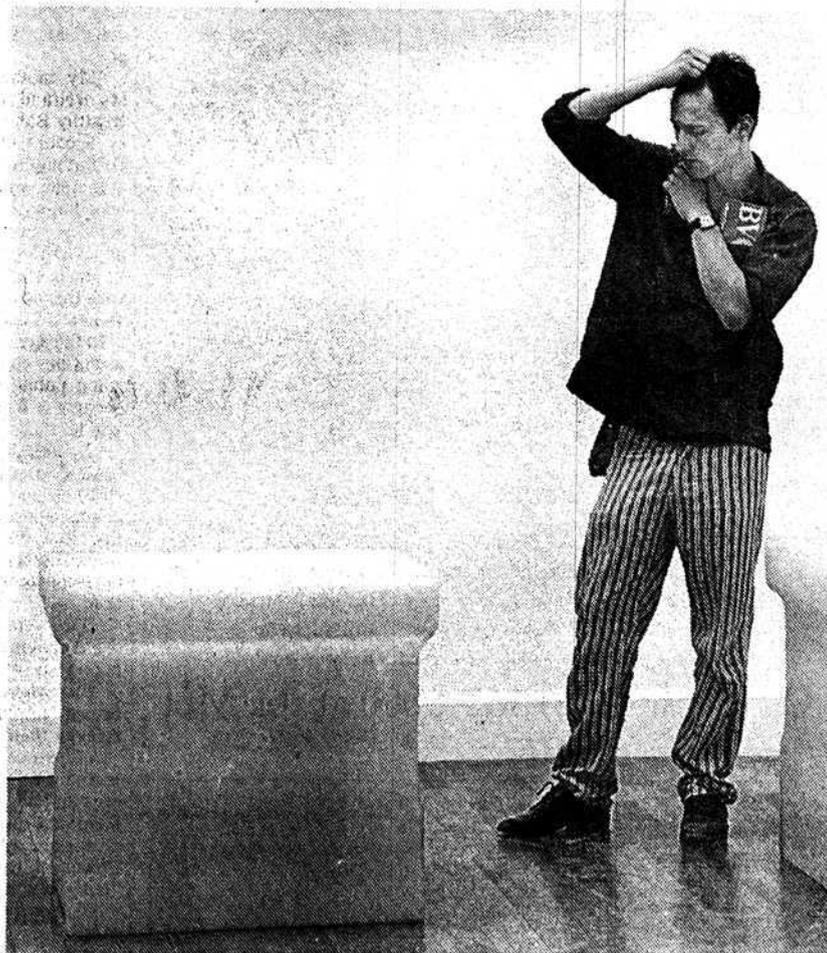
And of course these curators, collectors, artists and critics gathered in the Giardini di Castello, the gracious, dusty gardens at the tip of Venice that have been home to the Biennale for most of its century-long life.

Few Biennales seemed to need Venice's charms quite as much as this latest version, which opened to the public today with the traditional award ceremonies. This 47th incarnation, one of the weakest Biennales in recent memory, has been plagued by bureaucratic procrastination and a late start that seems to have handicapped its curator, Germano Celant, the powerful, well-connected Italian critic and impresario.

Mr. Celant's appointment was announced only in January, giving him less than five months instead of the usual two years to get things organized. He has clearly made a valiant effort, achieving what almost no one else could have, primarily on the strength of his considerable savvy and clout.

For many attending the three days of previews that began on Wednesday, that the Biennale had happened at all was considered something of a miracle, and its pulled-together, professional appearance was widely commented upon. The sprawling Italian Pavilion and the 16th-century Corderie of the Arsenal have been handsomely refurbished by the Italian designer Gae Aulenti to accommodate "Future Present Past," a spacious 70-artist international survey that Mr. Celant has organized as the Biennale's heart.

New walls have been built, spaces have been simplified and the Corderie's famous



A spectator confronts a Rachel Whiteread sculpture at the Venice Biennale.

Reuters

slanting floor — its central trough remaining from the building's glory days as a rope factory for the Venetian Navy — has even been leveled, although the spongy gray carpet that finished the job caused considerable complaint.

But Mr. Celant's miracle is not without obvious costs. "Future Present Past," which represents artists from the 1960's through the 90's, all with recent if not brand-new work, is weighed down by big-name, over-the-hill talents, including many artists with whom Mr. Celant has worked in previous exhibitions. Walking through it, one can

almost hear the sound of chips being cashed in.

The Biennale's lackluster effect is extended by the displays in many of the national pavilions, whose selections are determined by their respective countries and are beyond the overseeing curator's control. This unusual structure — part curatorial deliberation, part curatorial randomness — is capable of imparting a great deal of valuable raw information, even when the show, like this one, lacks insight and inspiration. The problem is that Mr. Celant's own show is so

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In Venice, the Biennale Shuffles to Life Again

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incoherent and arbitrary that it simply echoes the randomness of the national pavilions.

The Italian Pavilion, which showcases the older participants in "Future Present Past" is especially embarrassing, running through an uneven list of the usual suspects that includes Gerhard Richter, but also Jim Dine and Tony Cragg (though not Bruce Nauman). It seems like a random assortment reflecting artists (or artists' dealers) Mr. Celant could count on for favors and others who were grateful to be invited. One often has the feeling that the artists didn't have time or couldn't be bothered to send their best efforts.

This section of the show, however, was strengthened by "Balkan Baroque," Marina Abramovic's searing if melodramatic installation, which Mr. Celant added after the Republic of Montenegro canceled her show the Yugoslavian Pavilion. Involving piles of animal bones and a video projection, it details a Balkan form of rodent control rife with harrowing political implications.

The younger artists, isolated for the most part in the Corderie, achieve a bit more vitality and even recapture some of the spirit of the Aperto (Open) exhibitions. Initiated in 1980, the Aperto shows included emerging artists from around the world, countering the territorial nature of the pavilions with an energetic artistic free-for-all.

But even if Mr. Celant deserves credit for bringing back a bit of Aperto liveliness, the Corderie section of "Future Present Past" is also often bogged down by a good-old-boy atmosphere and regularly punctuated with vapid, overblown statements. This section begins with a large mirrored figure by Jeff Koons that could easily be a weak work by Keith Haring. At midpoint, there is a row of enormous wax crosses by Robert Longo and, at the end, empty paintings and bronze sculptures, also enormous, by Julian Schnabel.

The best efforts here were made for the most part by women with cameras. Near the Corderie's center, the English artist Sam Taylor-Wood dissected a typical movie moment, a man breaking up with a woman in a crowded restaurant, in a powerful, three-image video projection that focuses on the woman's angry, tear-stained face and the man's bulky, fidgeting hands.

An even stronger impression was made directly across the way by the Swiss artist Pipilotti Rist, whose ear for music and eye for color and physical rhythm is turning music video into a serious art form, and a painterly one at that. In her "Ever Is Over All," a beautiful young woman carries a long-stemmed flower known as a red-hot poker through the streets, like someone a few years late for her First Communion; an adjacent screen shows the flower's red, phallic-like blooms in close-up. She sud-

denly starts swinging the flower, which turns out to be a metal facsimile, through the windows of parked cars, her mounting pleasure shared by a passing policewoman.

The art in the national pavilions and the main exhibition alike reflected the latest swings in the esthetic pendulum: the growing interest in narrative, often of a mythological sort, as well as the widespread use of film and video and a nearly total lack of interest in painting. And sometimes it seemed that the most important contest in contemporary art right now is that between virtual reality and the real kind.

The ball goes back and forth across the net a few times at the Nordic Countries Pavilion, which has mounted a small Aperto of its own. There, one can peruse a quasi-archeological installation piece by Mark Dion, an American artist, featuring a fascinating and rather beautiful array of ceramic, glass and metal fragments dredged up from the bottom of Venice's canals, or the verdant garden, planted around trees that have always grown through the pavilion's roof, in which Henrik Hakansson of Sweden will be breeding butterflies until the exhibition ends on Oct. 15.

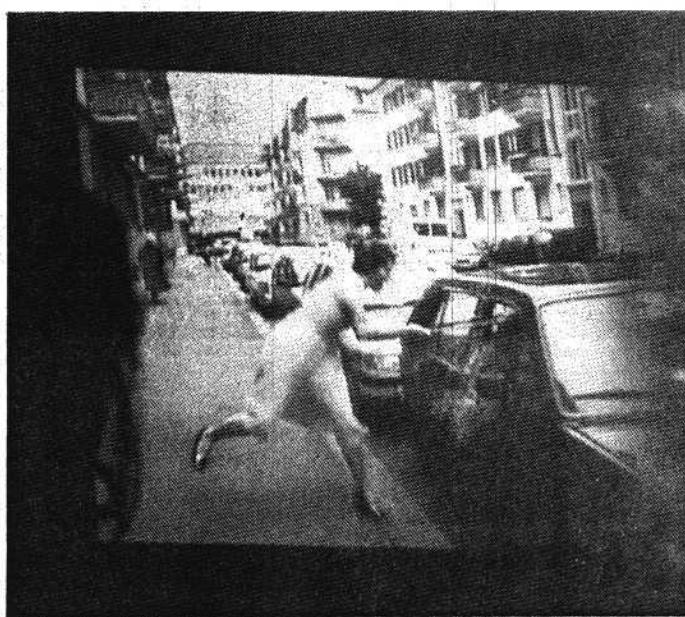
On the other hand, there's a miniature Greek Classical temple where one can sit and watch a video by Sven Pahlsson of Norway that includes eerie, digitally realized versions of

The achievement is that the show has gone on at all.

the great mansions of the antebellum South. In another small gallery, the Japanese photographer and performance artist Mariko Mori seems to float before the viewer in elaborate Buddhist-goddess regalia, releasing little orbs of light, or drifting feathers from her fingertips. It isn't the artist at all, but rather an example of what is said to be the world's first three-dimensional video, and for reasons both technical and esthetic, it's one of the Biennale's standouts.

So many of the show's high points were executed in video or film that many visitors were calling it "the techno Biennale." At the Canadian Pavilion, Rodney Graham exhibited "Vexation Island," a short, ravishing color film of himself as a marooned, amnesiac 18th-century gentleman who keeps getting knocked unconscious by falling coconuts, only to awake, stand up and start shaking the tree again. And the Icelandic Pavilion provided a bit of historical context by exhibiting the work of Steina Vasulka, an American artist born in Iceland, who pioneered video art in the late 1960's.

The traditional art object had only a few convincing defenders. At the American Pavilion, Robert Coles-



Marco Bruzzo for The New York Times

A scene from Pipilotti Rist's video installation "Ever Is Over All."

cott's bright, luscious paintings, with their raucous figurative style and caustically ribald commentary on American racism, turned in one of the more solid performances here. Being the first black artist to represent the United States at Venice, Mr. Colescott made history just by showing up.

Also impressive are the efforts of two sculptors: Rachel Whiteread, who filled the British Pavilion with her idiosyncratic, contemplative castings of the negative spaces of chairs, tables and bathtubs, and Thierry de Cordier, whose hulking black moundlike shapes — made of earth, hair, rubber, sticks, beer and trash — made a dramatic display at the Belgian Pavilion.

Ms. Whiteread won one of the three Premio 2000 prizes for outstanding achievement by a young artist, as did Ms. Rist and the English video artist Douglas Gordon, also at the Corderie. The two International Venice Biennale prizes, as the Golden Lions for painting and for sculpture are now called, went to Ms. Abramovic and Mr. Richter.

Inexplicably, the award for best pavilion went to France for an incoherent installation by Fabrice Hybert, who is spending the first week of the Biennale making daily videotapes from broadcast television programs. Citations for special merit went to Mr. de Cordier, the Belgian representative; Ms. Mori at the Nordic Countries Pavilion; Marie-Ange Guilleminot, a French installation artist at the Corderie, and a Ik-Joong Kang, whose cheerful snapshot-size paintings fill half the Korean Pavilion.

The newly instituted Golden Lion for Contribution to Contemporary Art has gone to the American Minimalist Agnes Martin and the Italian artist Emilio Vedova, whose pompous gestural canvases are similar to American Abstract Expressionism. Both artists are in "Future Present Past," their mutually antagonistic paintings sharing a big central gallery at the Italian Pavilion.

The requisite awards controversy

erupted in the Italian press today when one of the jurors, Maurizio Calvesi, an Italian art historian, quit the jury because Anselm Kiefer, whose compressed retrospective at the Correr Museum is affiliated with the Biennale, was not given a prize.

As usual, not all the countries could fit into the Giardini. Portugal, which plans to build its own pavilion, made the biggest splash, renting an entire palazzo on the Grand Canal to showcase the rather meager figurative paintings of Julião Sarmento. The hard-to-find Irish Pavilion on the Giudecca weighed in with a poignant video installation about "the troubles" by a young woman, Jaki Irvine. Instead of being humiliatingly crowded into the rabbit warren of galleries in a back corner of the Italian Pavilion as in previous years, many Latin American countries were humiliatingly crowded into a garden at the Querini Stampalia Foundation, a short walk from the Doge's Palace.

Meanwhile, back at the Giardini, at least two pavilions dissented from the pressure to bring quantities of art and people into direct contact with one another. Disdaining a traditional exhibition altogether, Austria seems to have blown its Biennale budget on a thick catalogue chronicling the achievement of the Viennese Actionists and Fluxus artists in the late 1950's. The Austrian Pavilion is filled with neat, room-sized piles of the publication (think of Carl Andre's brick sculptures to the ninth power) and can be taken by anyone willing to carry them.

The Japanese installation artist Rei Naito, whose New York debut last winter left a lot to be desired, turned the Japanese Pavilion here into a grandly delicate, tented shrine occupied, it seemed, by a semi-abstract goddess made of wire, gauze, seeds and other ephemera. By allowing only one person at a time to enter this calming environment, Ms. Naito dramatized the bewildering pace of art viewing that the Biennale imposes on its visitors, even in an off year.