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 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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Incoherent and arbitrary that it simply echoes the randomness of the international pavilions.

The Italian Pavilion, which showcases the film and video art of Korea, is called “Future Present.” It is especially embarrassing, running through an uneven list of the usual suspects that includes Gerhard Richter, but also Mike Kelley and, at the end, empty paint. This section of the show, however, was strengthened by “The Balkan Baroque,” Marina Abramovic’s video 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 self-immolation with harrowing political implications.

The younger artists, isolated for the most part in the Corderie, achieve a bit more reality and even recognition of the spirit of the Aperto (Open) exhibitions. Initiated in 1989, the Aperto shows included emerging artists from around the world, countering the usual suspect list of well-known artists, or artists’ dealers. Mr. Celant made the biggest splash, renting all the apartments in the Antwerp Pinacoteca, whose hulking black moundlike shapes - made of earth, hair, rubber, sticks, beer and trash, made a dramatic display at the Belgian Pavilion.

Mr. Whiteread won one of the three Premio 2000 prizes for outstanding achievement by a young artist, as did Mr. Richter and the English video artist Douglas Gordon, also at the Corderie. The two National Pavilions Biennale prizes, as did Ms. Rist and the English video artist Douglas Gordon, also at the Corderie. The two National Pavilions Biennale prizes, were won by the two sculptors: Rachel Whiteread, whose idiosyncratic, contemplative castings of the positive shapes of chairs, tables and bathtubs, and Thierry de Corderie, whose shinning little orbs of light, or drifting color films of himself as a marooned, amnesiac 18th-century gentleman who keeps getting knocked unconscious, rise into a grandly delicate, tented shrine 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 great mansions of the antebellum South. In another small gallery, the Japanese photographer and performance artist, Masahiko Kang, whose cheerful snapshot-size photographs of a female nude sculptural installation artist, as did Ms. Rist and the English video artist Douglas Gordon, also at the Corderie. The two National Pavilions Biennale prizes, were won by the two sculptors: Rachel Whiteread, whose idiosyncratic, contemplative castings of the positive shapes of chairs, tables and bathtubs, and Thierry de Corderie, whose shinning little orbs of light, or drifting color films of himself as a marooned, amnesiac 18th-century gentleman who keeps getting knocked unconscious, rise into a grandly delicate, tented shrine until the exhibition ends on Oct. 15.

The achievement is that the show has gone on all.

A scene from Pipilotti Rist’s video installation “Ever Is Over All.”

The best efforts 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 car crash, as did Ms. Rist and the English video artist Douglas Gordon, also at the Corderie. The two National Pavilions Biennale prizes, were won by the two sculptors: Rachel Whiteread, whose idiosyncratic, contemplative castings of the positive shapes of chairs, tables and bathtubs, and Thierry de Corderie, whose shinning little orbs of light, or drifting color films of himself as a marooned, amnesiac 18th-century gentleman who keeps getting knocked unconscious, rise into a grandly delicate, tented shrine until the exhibition ends on Oct. 15.

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-abstrac-t 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 bewilderling pace of art viewing that the Biennale imposes on its visitors, even in an off year.

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 Jukko Sarmanto. The Biennale’s Irish Pavilion at the Giudecca weighed in with a poignant video installation about “the troubles” by a young woman, Jaki Irvine. Instead of being humimly crowded into the rabbit warren of galleries in a back corner of the Italian Pavilion as in previous years, many Latin American countries were humiliously crowded into the 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 1960’s. The Australian Pavilion is filled with neat, room-sized piles of the publication (think of Carl Andre’s brick sculptures at the ninth garden; it can be taken by anyone willing to carry them.

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