



72. Malagan figure and fishes, North New Ireland, Papua New Guinea. c.1900. Wood, dimensions variable. (Musée Barber-Mueller, Geneva; exh. Beyeler Foundation, Basel); *Picture no. III*, by Piet Mondrian. 1938. Canvas, 100.5 by 141.5 cm. (Private collection; exh. Beyeler Foundation, Basel).

the Basel exhibition and its catalogue had reminded the visitor of this particular position. Rather, a distance was kept between the fields of art and anthropology, the first displayed throughout the exhibition, the latter being the unique subject of an 'interactive' catalogue in which a series of academic essays by ethnologists and anthropologists discuss the social function of the African and Oceanic works on display. The catalogue's introductory section presents, however, an open-ended dialogue between the Beyeler curator, art historians and anthropologists, in which Gottfried Boehm stresses the importance of inquiry 'into the preconditions that led people like Ernst Beyeler to interest themselves in this art . . .'.⁵

By staging the story of modern artists' flirtation with 'primitive' sculpture in the simple but all-the-more gripping terms of a *coup-de-foudre* we were constantly, though indirectly, reminded that the romantic story between 'primitive' and modern art is a one-sided affair. Nowhere was this more evident than in the juxtaposition of Mondrian's *Picture no. III* (1938) and three Malagan carvings from Papua New Guinea (nineteenth/twentieth century), the first rigorous and minimalist, the latter Baroque in effect, yet remaining a striking complementary group whose decorative impact was accentuated by the display (Fig. 72).

Although the history of primitivism staged at the Beyeler was more in the spirit of *bal en masque* than *Indiana Jones*, some of the unexpected visual and metaphorical juxtapositions succeeded in producing new perceptions of the modern works on display with the potential of constructing a less normative history of modern art. Menacing *nkisi* ('nail fetishes') from the Congo transformed Braque's and Picasso's analytic Cubism from post-Kantian to pre-Bataillon; Le Douanier Rousseau's

jungles finally found a truly primitivist dimension within an anthropomorphic forest of *tino aitu* Nukuoro figures; and a Hawaiian feather portrait of an angry war god screamed out the tension found in Rothko's monochromes. *Visual Encounters* is to be praised for its effort to take into account the different dimensions of the primitivist debate while celebrating the sense of beauty through which we have come to appreciate the works on display.

¹ Catalogue: *Visual Encounters. Africa, Oceania, and Modern Art*. Edited by Oliver Wick and Antje Denner. 48 pp. incl. 230 col. + 100 b. & w. ill. (Beyeler Foundation, Basel; Christopher Merian Verlag, Basel, 2009), CHF78. ISBN 978-3-85616-482-9.

² O. Wick: 'Preface', in *ibid.*, p.11.

³ W. Rubin, ed.: exh. cat. *'Primitivism' in 20th Century Art. Affinities of the Tribal and Modern*, New York (Museum of Modern Art) 1984.

⁴ N. Dias: 'Le Musée du Quai Branly. Une généalogie', *Le Débat. Histoire, philosophie, société* 147 (November–December 2007), pp.70–71.

⁵ Wick, *op. cit.* (note 1), p.24.

Venice Biennale

Venice

by JOHN-PAUL STONARD

DESPITE THE PROLIFERATION of 'collateral' events, the national Pavilions in the *Giardini* remain the heart of the Venice Biennale (to 22nd November). Shifting national rivalries have existed since the first Pavilion appeared just over one hundred years ago (Belgium, 1907), and with the rise of solo rather than group shows over the past forty years, have

perhaps even sharpened. Negotiations with this supposedly 'outdated' form of presentation, however, lend the excitement of a real competition to the Biennale, and also contribute to its continued political relevance.

For these reasons the sprawling exhibition *Making Worlds* in the *Arsenale* and the *Palazzo delle Esposizioni*, curated by Daniel Birnbaum, appears nebulous alongside the geo-political jigsaw of Pavilions in the *Giardini*.¹ A few individual works stand out, in particular Michelangelo Pistoletto's installation comprising a large room filled with ornate mirrors, one half of which had been smashed by the artist at a spectacular performance during the opening of the exhibition. The Swedish artist Nathalie Djurberg displays three stop-motion animated films of plasticine figures involved in surreal sexual goings-on, in a room crammed with monstrous plant-sculptures. Ulla von Brandenburg's installation *Singspiele* comprises a series of spaces made by hanging blankets that culminate in a viewing room, similarly constructed, in which a film shot in Le Corbusier's Villa Savoye is playing. The camera glides around and reveals the slow choreographed movements of a variety of actors. Such disengaged wandering is rather appropriate for the exhibition as a whole in which there is no real point of reference to orient attention.

By contrast the national Pavilions were incredibly varied and for the most part successful. Rumours spread in the days before the opening of a grand *coup de théâtre* in the Danish and Nordic Pavilions, where Michael Elmgreen and Ingar Dragset had for the first time in the history of the Biennale created an exhibition across two Pavilions. Both spaces were beautifully crafted as domestic



73. Photograph of performance *Paso Doble*, by Miquel Barceló and Josef Nadj. Held at the Teatro Fondamenta Nuove, Venice 2009.



74. *Fight*, by Mark Lewis. 2009. Still from single-screen projection, HD video, 5 minutes 27 seconds. (Collection of the artist; exh. Canadian Pavilion, Venice Biennale).

interiors displaying works of art as if in a collector's home. The choice of works was such that at first glance it might seem that Elmgreen and Dragset themselves were responsible for everything, and indeed their copy of a Brancusi, titled *Torso of a (Forever) young man* (2008), sat perfectly opposite Sturtevant's copies of paintings by Frank Stella. On the surface the point appears to mix art and design, a 'modern pictures for modern rooms' type of display, nostalgic and *unheimlich* in equal measure. Furniture by the design trio Norway Says is ranged next to works by Martin Jacobson, and elsewhere artists such as Terence Koh and Jonathan Monk are included. A narrative of sorts is formed in the second Pavilion by four naked youths (who conveniently recovered their clothes in time for the public opening) lounging Hockney-style in an open-plan interior, while outside the Pavilion the stuffed body of a collector floated face-down in a small swimming pool. As a whole the display is extremely stylish, but also excruciatingly 'knowing': one has the impression of being manically winked at. A pretend

estate agent's very hammy, predictably ironic tour of the Danish Pavilion is best avoided.

The invitation extended to the British artist Liam Gillick to exhibit in the German Pavilion has also been the source of much discussion. He is not the first non-German to have received the call – Nam June Paik was invited in 1993 (although he had far deeper connections with Germany) and it might be remembered that in 1948 the Pavilion was given over to an exhibition of French Impressionism. Gillick, who does not seem to have lived or worked much in Germany, appears to have been flummoxed by his election and one can only admire the off-handed nerve of his response, a series of bland pine cupboards and a stuffed animatronic cat. For those who are a little lost about what this all 'means', a handy volume of essays on Gillick's work has just been published, *Meaning Liam Gillick*.² Gillick is a master of the 'look' of meaning, a putative heritage of conceptual art in which meaning itself somehow has a style. Traces of further unintended 'meaning' are not hard to detect. That an unrealised idea by the artist for this

display – a copy of a model by Arnold Bode of a redesign for the German Pavilion – is marketed as a limited edition for a large sum of money on the back of the visitors' information pamphlet was an even bolder challenge to the spiritual and political importance of national representation.

If, over the years, nationalism has formed an arid theme for works in the Giardini, in certain cases, and with subtly judged gestures, it may still hit the mark. The Slovakian artist Roman Ondák's installation, titled *Loop*, for the Czech and Slovak Pavilion, involves nothing more than a garden planted within the Pavilion, through which a path leads directly in and out. Some lingered to search for the art, behind a shrub perhaps, some walked straight through and out before realising that there was nothing more to see. Like some of the best commissions the Pavilion itself was an integral part of a display, becoming a microcosm of national division and evoking a paradox of inside and outside that in different ways is central to the politics of nationalism.

Mark Lewis's high-definition films in the Canadian Pavilion were extraordinarily engaging, although it was for one work, *Fight* (Fig.74), that the display took off, and it is a shame that the focus was not entirely on this film. Showing a market stall in front of which actors recreate a simmering altercation between two unidentified groups, who appear to be divided along ethnic lines, and shot using an extremely high-definition camera and a method of back-projection typical of Lewis's work, *Fight* is an absorbing and fascinating piece. Yet, one wants to ask of the commissioner, why here, why now? Echoes have not diminished of Rodney Graham's brilliant film *Vexation Island*, which transformed the Canadian Pavilion into a desert island hut in 1997. The best Giardini displays are those that respond at least in some way to the context, and this much at least can be said for Gillick's cupboards and cat.

A similar dislocation between place and display can be seen in the Spanish Pavilion,



75. *Giardini*, by Steve McQueen. 2009. Still from double-screen projection. (Collection of the artist; exh. British Pavilion, Venice Biennale).

containing numerous paintings by Miquel Barceló made since 2000. Some of these are interesting, but there appears no reason why so many have been gathered in this particular location; and one can only empathise with the artist on this missed opportunity. The display might have focused on the extraordinary performance, *Paso Doble* (Fig. 73), first given at the Avignon festival, and restaged at the Teatro Fondamenta Nuove in Venice during the opening days of the Biennale, involving Barceló and the choreographer Josef Nadj performing various physical engagements on a clay stage and with clay hoods moulded into strange bestial heads. Here, however, only a DVD of the performance is shown in the reading area of the Pavilion, minimising its impact.

Transforming a Pavilion into a mini-museum is also the approach adopted for the American contribution, with a flawless display of work by Bruce Nauman. Yet the delicacy and tact of museum curating seem at odds with the opportunity that Pavilion architecture offers for surprise encounter. One has the impression of being in the wing of a larger retrospective, and that a consecration was taking place instead of a revelation, particularly in the case of Nauman's fountain work in the final room, which recalled the more interesting fountain piece by the artist in the Italian Pavilion in 2007.

Most fascinating of all, however, is the transformation of the British Pavilion into a cinema, with timed viewings of Steve McQueen's new film, *Giardini* (Fig. 75).³ Tickets, at least in the opening days, were hard to come by, reminding one of the 'booking is essential' culture of contemporary Britain. But here it was also worth the wait. McQueen shot his film in the Giardini between Biennales, during the low winter months when the Pavilions are boarded up and nature reclaims the grounds from art. Comprised of a series of still-camera shots, often close-ups, and various views of the Pavilions, it creates a highly sensuous combination of images and sound on a double-screen projection. Greyhounds often appear, scavenging around the debris of the last Biennale. They suggest the fantastical quality of the gardens imagined through art, the association arising with the greyhounds that can be found in works by Carpaccio. Other creatures invade the *Giardini*, from caterpillars to beetles, just as the seasons strip the trees and create a sense of desolation so antithetical to the excitement of the Biennale. Bin-liners of rubbish await collection outside the Swiss Pavilion; a name is scrawled on the door of the Italian Pavilion; from a high window of the boarded-up Danish Pavilion a curious orange pipe emerges. Out of season the Giardini is also a cruising ground for male hustlers, who appear in McQueen's film standing and waiting. One short sequence shows two figures emerging from the darkness and embracing – a curiously mawkish bit of narrative in an otherwise seamlessly evocative film. Despite this, *Giardini* remains

a masterly film, mainly because it so simply reverses the stakes of what it means to exhibit it in a national Pavilion, and to carry such a burden of expectation to excite and shock. It reveals the historical layering underlying a sense of place, the magical qualities of what remains once the party is over and the fascination of time passing. As a leitmotif this feeling of eternal expectation is captured in the final shot, showing a drop of water hanging from a spring bud, reflecting the British Pavilion like a *specchio convesso*, trembling but not falling.

¹ Catalogue: *Making Worlds: 53rd International Art Exhibition. La Biennale di Venezia*. Edited by Daniel Birnbaum. 704 pp. incl. numerous col. + b. & w. ills. (Marsilio, Venice, 2009), £65. ISBN 978-88-317-9696-5.

² M. Szewczyk, ed.: *Meaning Liam Gillick*, Cambridge MA 2009.

³ Catalogue: *Steve McQueen Giardini Notebook*. With an essay by T.J. Demos. Unpaginated, with numerous illustrations. (British Council, London, 2009), £13. ISBN 978-0-86355-625-8.

Pasqualino Rossi

Serra San Quirico

by ERIKA LANGMUIR

ITALY NEVER CEASES to surprise. Not only does austere, medieval Serra San Quirico, a tiny rock-built mountain commune in the Marches, contain S. Lucia, the most sumptuously decorated Baroque church of the region, but the church also houses two altarpieces and, in the apse, five large canvases by Pasqualino Rossi (Vicenza 1641–Rome 1722), a painter once renowned in Rome for small cabinet pictures. This first exhibition devoted to the artist, *Pasqualino Rossi: La scoperta di un protagonista del Barocco*, and the first ever to be held in Serra San Quirico, in the ex-monastery of S. Lucia (to 13th September), turns out to be a genuine art-historical revelation. It reconstructs Rossi's eclectic *œuvre* – until recently almost universally misattributed to others¹ – in the context of older and younger contemporaries. Exhibition and catalogue together illuminate a complex and not well-known moment in Italian late seicento art and collecting, when two seemingly contrasting trends coincided: a 'modern' taste for genre, and a cult of sixteenth-century masters, notably Giorgione and Correggio.²

While proclaiming himself to be an autodidact, formed through assiduous copying of paintings in Venice and Rome,³ Rossi may have been a pupil of, and was certainly indebted to, the cultivated though eccentric neo-Giorgionesque artist Pietro Della Vecchia (Vicenza? 1603–Venice 1678). Della Vecchia's penchant for caricature is especially evident in the *Mathematics lesson* (cat.

no.III.3), probably a workshop replica of a theme frequent in this artist's *œuvre*. Images of instruction – often painted in pairs, distinguishing between the teaching of male and female accomplishments – became, on a more diminutive scale, a staple of Rossi's repertory. The earliest shown here, *A school of women's work*, with women intent on embroidery, sewing and reading, and *Rehearsal for a concert*, with young players and singers (nos.II.1 and 2), are close to Della Vecchia in extravagance as well as in their free brushwork and their predominantly brown, red and ochre palette. They also point to Rossi's acquaintance with the hectic works of that epigone of the Bamboccianti active in the Veneto, Matteo Ghedoni (?1626–Padua 1689), known as Matteo dei Pitocchi, who specialised in motifs drawn from Callot's prints of beggars and vagabonds (no.III.5).

Perhaps the most impressive of the 'contextual' artists shown here, however, is the Dane Eberhart Keilhau (Helsingør 1624–Rome 1687), known as Bernard Keil or Monsù Bernardo. He imported to Rome a more decorous depiction of humble sitters, derived from domestic Dutch genre, paving the way for Rossi's later, bourgeois images of 'everyday life'. The previously unpublished *Girl with a pail* (no.III.9) demonstrates Keilhau's 'naturalistic poetry' at its highest: the freely painted three-quarter figure on the scale of life, turning her gaze on the viewer, is no longer an object of repulsion or laughter, but a subject, of humanity equal to the viewer's.

A notary's act of 1700 indicates that the Vicenza-born, Venetian-trained Pasqualino Rossi had relatives in Parma, suggesting a first-hand knowledge of Correggio's works,



76. *Lamentation*, by Pasqualino Rossi. Before 1689. Panel, 43.5 by 38.8 cm. (Museo del Barocco Romano, Ariccia; exh. S. Lucia, Serra San Quirico).