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EXHIBITION REVIEW

'All the World's Futures,' 56th International Art Exhibition—La Biennale di Venezia Review

A show filled with art that takes us closer to the lived experience of people from more places than most of us would ever encounter on our own.








Crowds explore the 56th Venice Biennale.

PHOTO: STEFANO MARCHIANTE/COURTESY LA BIENNALE DI VENEZIA

By Jonathan Fineberg

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3. Why More Women Have Lost Jobs During the Pandemic 
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5. How to Properly (and Safely) Disinfect Your Home 

All the World's Futures

Venice

56th International Art Exhibition—La Biennale di Venezia

Through Nov. 22

On Sept. 11, 1973, the Chilean military, under Augusto Pinochet, ousted Salvador Allende, the democratically elected president. Allende was found dead before the end of the day. Six months later, the Venice Biennale responded to these events by organizing its international art

fair as a debate about art and culture as agents of social and political change. Okwui Enwezor, the Nigerian-born curator of the 56th Biennale (through Nov. 22), has cited this precedent as his inspiration. The world “seems to be lacerated by divisions and wounds, pronounced inequalities and uncertainties concerning the future,” Paolo Baratta, the president of the Biennale, explained at a pre-opening news conference with Mr. Enwezor; this year’s Biennale, “All the World’s Futures,” addresses this “age of anxiety.”

Today, a revival of the 1970s is under way in the art world. In Mr. Enwezor’s Biennale you have the 1970s neon sign sculptures of Bruce Nauman, the 1974 Marcel Broodthaers installation “Un Jardin d’Hiver” (a kind of colonial-era palm court with souvenir objects), the 1970s projects of Hans Haacke and Robert Smithson and other ’70s works as talismans for the show, mirroring a strong tendency in the art world now to make art that is “activist” and “conceptual,” though we are all at the same time eager consumers of products from the likes of Apple, the Gap, Facebook and Comcast.

Seventies-style protest is no longer suited to the times, so these references become nostalgic tokens of radicalism from a distant past. Never mind that Mr. Haacke has a terrific new work up in Trafalgar Square in London at the moment; here we see only his work of the ’70s, and the installation of the Broodthaers is so carelessly done here as to be almost unrecognizable, as if just having it there is all that matters. The catalog doesn’t provide any captions—so if you don’t already know the reference, you’re out of luck.

The Venice Biennale is always a sprawling, unruly affair, and no curator has ever managed to make it coherent—any more than world culture itself is coherent. Still, certain themes keep emerging in this year’s show—violence and political repression, income inequality, a dystopian view of the future, and a disjointed perspective on the present.

Chantal Akerman made a disturbing and effective video installation of a terrifying drive through a mined landscape. In the Russian Pavilion, Irina Nakhova included, among other images, old family photographs in which her mother with advancing Alzheimer’s had circled still familiar faces and then scratched them out as she lost them; the artist took this as an analog to “our Soviet history: people were disappeared not only physically during Stalin’s purges, but from documents, books, memory and history itself.” Her observations

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Few things in this Biennale are likely to be on view in major museums 50 years from now, except those works that are already there: the Bruce Nauman neons of the 1970s, the Farm Security Administration photographs of Walker Evans, the Marcel Broodthaers, and work by well-known younger artists like Kerry James Marshall and Jaume Plensa, who installed a magnificent head in the nave of San Giorgio Maggiore.

The Broodthaers forms the entrance to what Mr. Enwezor described as a "core part of the program," an amphitheater in the Central Pavilion in which all three volumes of Karl Marx's "Das Kapital" are being read aloud by trained actors over the course of the exhibition. This book that "could not be more relevant for our times," Mr. Enwezor tells us, points us to the ascendance of capital wealth over all other values and to the ubiquitous inequity in the distribution of wealth. The problem with this is that reading fragments of Marx's book trivializes it into an emoticon for an impressionistic feeling of social dystopia in Mr. Enwezor's "dialectic of references." Marx decries the "fetishizing" of the object and yet that is what the Biennial promotes. The high-rolling collectors come to research art "futures," and the most prominent "exhibit" is always the row of block-long yachts docked out in front.

Where this Biennale succeeds is in bringing us art that takes us closer to the lived experience of more people from more places than most of us would ever encounter on our own. This reflects Mr. Enwezor's empathic and generous spirit. He asks us to think about how the world we live in frames everyone's experience and may determine the kind of future that some of us or perhaps all of us will inhabit. So despite its flaws, this Biennale is thought provoking, it is full of interesting things to see, and its humanism is uplifting.

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A poignant short video in the Angola Pavilion by the young artist Binelde Hyrcan sums it up: Four young boys sit chest deep in holes in the sand, looking out to the sea, and they talk about the future. The littlest one in front is the limo driver, and the two in the back are the "big shots" arguing about who will have the better life. "I'm going to America," one says, "and live in a building; you're going to stay here and live in a house made of cans!"

Mr. Fineberg teaches at the University of California, Irvine. His book "Modern Art at the Border of Mind and Brain" (University of Nebraska Press) was published this month.