

A Pavilion too Far?

Imposters, water taxis and, perhaps, some illumination? **Gavin Younge** negotiates the 54th Venice Biennale

South Africa's entry to this prestigious event has not made a splash insofar as the world art press is concerned. Neither *Artpress* (a monthly, bilingual, specialist art magazine with a Venice Biennale supplement to its July edition), nor *Beaux Arts* in its July Venice Biennale edition discussed the South African pavilion. Internet searches also do not yield much. In fact, the American curator Antoine Guerrero is the only critic to mention our pavilion. He praises Mary Sibande's "mannequins" in a paragraph that outlines the controversy and the difficulty in visiting our pavilion. "You need a boat" is his concluding riposte.¹

Apparently Monna Mokoena, an established gallery owner in Johannesburg, approached the Department of Arts and Culture (DAC) with a proposal for the 2011 Biennale of contemporary art in Venice. His proposal was accepted and he appointed Thembinkosi Goniwe to curate an exhibition marking South Africa's official return to the Biennale with its own national pavilion. Four artists were chosen to represent South Africa, two of whom were part of Mokoena's stable of artists. Zwelethu Mthethwa pulled out citing a lack of transparency with the process and the budget. This caused a furore in the South African press and infuriated bloggers. Nonetheless, on 3 June our pavilion opened to some fanfare in the presence of the Minister of Arts and Culture and South Africa's ambassador to Italy.²

The controversy notwithstanding, South Africa's inclusion in the Biennale, with her own pavilion, is important. Through its cultural funding agencies, our government has invested hugely in what is billed the Art Olympics. Figured globally, a new generation of South African artists could reach a zone of self-esteem in their placed-ness, finding confidence in their own thoughts and opinions, unfettered by congruence with international trends, yet awake to possible connections.

Let's Slice It

La Biennale di Venezia. 54. Esposizione Internazionale d'Arte (to give it its full name) comprises two main venues, the Arsenale and the Giardini di Castello, and features several hundred exhibitions involving almost a thousand artists. Twenty-eight nations have built their own pavilions in the Giardini, while a further twenty have their pavilions elsewhere in town. In addition there are thirty-seven "collateral" exhibitions, and eight museums with their own, curated, exhibitions. These are officially part of La Biennale. The main exhibition of the current Biennale, is *ILLUMInations* curated by Bice Curiger.³ It is housed in the Giardini's Central Pavilion, as well as in the Arsenale. Eighty-three artists (including Tintoretto, with three works) give expression to Curiger's desire to "shed light" on the institution of a biennale (drawing attention to dormant and unrecognised opportunities) and the distinctive character of the Venice Biennale with its national pavilions. In her choice of artists, Curiger specifically wished to move away from conservative notions of "nation" to find new forms of community and to "negotiate differences and affinities that might serve as models for the future".⁴

South African Pavilion Desire: Ideal Narratives in Contemporary South African Art

The South African pavilion is one of the independent national pavilions in rented accommodation outside either the Arsenale or the Giardini. It can be visited for free (like many of this category of pavilions/exhibitions). It can most easily be reached after visiting the Arsenale (it lies a mere sixty metres from the end of the Arsenale, but separated by a stretch of deep water). A free, one-minute boat ride gets you to the other side of this canal. This entry-point is not recommended however – the water taxi is not allowed to bring visitors back to the Arsenale and you will be marooned there. Rather make a separate trip after viewing Palazzo Bembo (Andrew Putter) and Museo Fortuny (*TRA: Edge of becoming* – follows Axel Vervoordt's acclaimed trilogy, *Artempo* in 2007; *Academia* in 2008 and *Infinitum* in 2009.) None of this is clear from the Biennale map or brochure, and I approached the South African pavilion

from the Arsenale, in a small boat but in good spirits.

The building itself is splendid. Built between 1809 and 1814, it allowed for the mechanical placement of masts on tall ships. It fell into ruin, was revamped in 2006 following an architectural competition, and now serves as an extension of the Arsenale.

Lyndi Sales's works are hung on the ground floor. Her main work, *Satellite Telescope*, consists of about fifty laser-cut ovals of Perspex arranged on a central axis. Each panel or disc is encircled by a diagrammatic representation of an orbit and the ensemble is suspended lengthwise above the viewer's head. Planetary movements, symbology and fragility are clearly invoked. The curator's note explains that the work relates to "that impossible world where the eye can see itself seeing". It must be said that Thembinkosi Goniwe's notes are not that clear. I struggle with his contention that "[Sales] invites us to overcome the impossibility that Sartre poses and in her work, viewers do see, while being conscious of the apparatus of their sight."⁵ Does he mean gaze behaviour; the eyes' saccadic non-attention to detail? And as for the Sartrean reference, would that be Sartre's 1943 treatise, *Being and Nothingness*?

Sales's works on paper are easy on the eye. Here she has used watercolour and acrylic on Fabriano paper, prior to cutting out complex, net and web patterns using laser-cutting technology. The paper surface is almost entirely removed, leaving lace-like, paper-thin sculptures floating within the frame. These works allude to a "parallel universe" and what the artist refers to as double vision.

Mary Sibande presents an installation on the upper floor (shared with Siemon Allen), remarkable for its ambitious scope (fourteen life-size, polyester-resin figures), and for its out-of-control, psychosocial interiority. Despondent over her parents' failed marital relationship, she has devised a memorial to Sophie (apparently her mother's given name), but in the artist's own likeness. Twelve of these women warriors are presented, North Korean style, marching towards Sophie resplendent in her mountainous blue dress. Their arms are stretched out in the manner of someone aiming a rifle. They all wear green/blue uniforms with lamb-chop sleeves, and army helmets. In front of this platoon are two further figures. Here the artist is trying to reconcile her parent's differences through having them dance the tango. In its way, this stiff, un-tango dance measures up to the playful, *mise-en-scène* of Vervoordt's "theatrical representative dimension".⁶ In other words, all is not as it seems: "Sophie" is not mother, she is a fiberglass copy of Mary, who is both mother and the father.

Siemon Allen is an archivist. A collector. He has an eye for finding objects with an historical aura that brings lost or unintended congruencies to the fore in different contexts. So it is with his works for the South African pavilion. *Records* comprises five digital prints of vinyl records issued by South African recording companies. They have been scanned and blown up to huge proportions. They are black and impassive. The labels, and the recording surfaces, bear testimony to the passage of time and use. Although the records are mute, the viewer ponders their scratched grooves and eroded labels. One wonders at the fact that there was once a Lafayette Recording Studios (PTY) Ltd in Johannesburg, but where is the angst, the social critique promised by Goniwe's assertion that Allen's works "present imaginary truths or, rather, ideal narratives that reflect on South Africa and how it has transcended its past"? It seems to me that Allen spurns narrative. His collections act as an archive. As with all archives, there is no sanctity. All archives ignore some items, and conserve others. Allen asks us to unlearn what we believe to be important, to find with him the eye's delight in a line, a grid, a pattern. With time, and with visual patience, his collections reveal interstitial connections with the apartheid-era South African recording industry, but one would have to consult either David Coplan's pioneering study, *In Township Tonight!*, or Christopher Ballantine's tightly focused musical research to gain any insight into the breadth and political depth of that phenomenon known as "South African music".

So what is it all about? Goniwe has called his exhibition *Desire* and he tells us that "desire is taken to mean yearning and need, recognising what individuals





PREVIOUS PAGE Siemon Allen, *Labels*, 2011, 2500 digital labels sourced from the artist's South African audio collection DVD sleeves, c. 15 X 4m. Site-responsive installation at the Torre di Porta Nuova, Arsenale Nuovo South African Pavilion 54th Venice Biennale. Photo: Kendall Buster. LEFT South African Pavilion showing, foreground Mary Sibande, *Lovers in Tango*, 2011, fibreglass casts and fabrics, 944 x 632cm, Photo: Kendall Buster. RIGHT Siemon Allen, *Better*, 2009, Epson K3 archival ink on Epson Velvet Fine Art paper, 200 x 200cm. Photo: Andrew Griffin

do not have, but long for." This is strangely lacking in lustre. I am deeply pleased that our government has finally done what it should have done seventeen years ago – that is, allow artists to negotiate "differences and affinities" in an arena that is richly populated with artists, critics and curators from the DRC, Cuba, Chile, China, Costa Rica, Cypress and Croatia (to choose countries beginning with C). Our fervent hope is that the DAC will immediately set in motion a planning process that will deliver an even more stunning entry in 2013. All other democracies have a transparent and democratic selection process, there is no reason for us to not follow suit.

Italian Pavilion: L'Arte non è Cosa Nostra

"Scandalous" is how *Beaux Arts* magazine described the Italian Pavilion at VB 54. For *L'Arte non è Cosa Nostra* (Art is not a Mafia) in the Arsenale, Vittorio Sgarbi asked 200 intellectuals to each choose one artist. The result is a mess: a jaw-dropping mess of dishevelled, mismatched works hanging floor to ceiling, or perched on obtrusive, white metal rods that are a physical and visual hazard. To think that they were purpose-made for an art exhibition, even for one at junior school level is inconceivable. At the point at which one wonders whether or not any curatorial premise was applied, one realises that the curatorial intention was to have no curatorial intention.

Great Britain: I, Imposter

Mike Nelson's sad refuge was first presented at the Istanbul Biennial in 2003. Of all possible installations, this is the most difficult to demount, transport across oceans and reconstruct eight years later. In a sentence, the work is a house. A Turkish caravanserai with low doorways, several levels, open courtyards, all built within an existing nineteenth-century building. The ceilings are so low, and the rooms so airless and dust-laden, that the curator has installed a Health Warning at the entrance. Central to Nelson's *Magazin: Büyükle Valide Han* (2003) and *I, Imposter* (2011) is a split-level darkroom filled with black-and-white photographic images of the caravanserai and its adjacent surroundings. In moving the work from Istanbul, that artist states he could not really use photographs of Venice because "photography had sucked the soul out of the city".⁸ Since the two cities were related in the Byzantine empire, he chose to stick with images of the Mercan area of Istanbul. Perhaps our arts administrators could learn from the British exhibition in several respects. Mike Nelson's exhibition is supported by a multi-authored catalogue. In my view this gives the British Arts Council, the curator and the commissioner ample opportunity to add value to their country's presence at the Biennale. Everyone instrumental in the selection of the artist/s and the organisation of the exhibition is named and acknowledged. One gets the strong impression that their planning process had been in place for at least the past several years. In our case, the visitor handout does not mention the name of the commissioner, nor does the www.sa-venice-biennale.com website feature interviews with artists or curator.

USA Pavilion: Gloria

Lisa Freiman of the Indianapolis Museum of Art chose two artists who work collaboratively, Jennifer Allora and Guillermo Calzadilla. They adopted a tongue-in-cheek theme, "Gloria/Glory". Allora & Calzadilla presented five interactive/performance-related works. Large among these was an upside-down, sixty-ton military tank entitled *Track and Field* on top of which Dan O'Brien (decathlon legend) mounted a treadmill. As he ran on the treadmill, the two tank tracks wound around at a threatening pace with a menacing clatter. Within ten minutes, forty people had stopped photographing Maurizio Cattelan's stuffed pigeons sitting all over and within each room of the *ILLUMInations* pavilion and were expressing digital amazement at Dan O'Brien's rhythmic stride. Soon, the crowd was forty-deep and spilling into the rest of Allora & Calzadilla's installations. They had taken the six-metre-high, bronze Statue of Freedom (a part of the Capitol since 1863),⁹ replicated it in bronze at a lesser scale, displayed it in a Solaris 442 tanning bed and called it *Armed Freedom Lying on a Sunbed*. The work is impressive, new, strangely vital, but spoiled in some small measure by the over-reaching label that announces that the work "addresses ... the nature of sight and the ability to focus clearly". Their work, *Algorithm* combines a custom-made pipe organ with an ATM. Yes, it works. "Each financial transaction that visitors conduct generates a unique musical score that produces randomized notes and chords at varying degrees of volume by driving pressurized air through pipes selected via the ATM keyboard."¹⁰

Two further pieces use the kind of business-class airline seats used in flight simulators as gymnastic equipment. *Body in Flight (Delta)* and *Body in Flight (American)* are presented in different galleries and call on gymnasts to perform routines at specified times. The curator states that Allora & Calzadilla worked with gymnast David Durante and modern dance choreographer Rebecca Davis to create a new vocabulary of movement that is an unexpected hybrid of gymnastics and modern dance.

French Pavilion: Chance

Christian Boltanski filled the French Pavilion with a welter of scaffold towers arranged as one would imagine the inside of a huge printing press would look—cogs, motors, rollers, paper guides. Whirling around at frantic speed is a thirty-centimetre wide strip of film showing infants' faces. In an antechamber a projector beams an ever-changing kaleidoscope of sixty Polish "new born" and fifty-two "dead Swiss" faces. These have been cut into three, and run separately from one another so that the faces are incomplete. Your job as viewer is to try and stop the display so that the three sections cohere into a single visage. If you manage this (there is a button to help you), music plays and you win the work. A whole million-Euro Boltanski to take home with you. One can also play this game of chance on line, for one minute a day. Simply go to www.boltanski-chance.com and try your luck.



Nicholas Hlobo, *Impundulu Zonke Ziyandilandela*, 2011, suspended sculpture of rubber, ribbon and mixed media, installation view. Photo: Giorgio Zucchiatti and courtesy la Biennale di Venezia

ILLUMInations

Bice Curiger included three works by Tintoretto in the belief that they are unorthodox, experimental and distinguished by a dramatic sense of light. These were exhibited in a central room under heavy police guard, and no photography of any sort was permitted. It was a relief not having to traipse across town to see his *Creation of the Animals*, and so, yes it was interesting to view the three works at close quarters at first hand. In a way, their inclusion signalled the flaw of all biennale-type exhibitions. There is simply too much to see, and the viewing or appreciation of one work is thwarted by the proximity of another. Norma Jeane's plasticine playpen ruins the works of Cindy Sherman. More importantly, perhaps, Monika Sosnowska's *Para-Pavilion* spoils the works of David Goldblatt.¹¹ Curiger invited four artists to construct these "para-pavilions" designed to house works by other artists. For Goldblatt and Haroon Mirza, Sosnowska designed an awkward, inside-out affair. All acute angles and narrow triangles, the outer surface covered in floral wallpaper, the inner walls, on which Goldblatt's works were hung, were plain, with exposed metal tubing. Goldblatt presents several aerial photographs of cluster housing in North West Province. Humourously, he entitles one of these roofscapes *Family Picnic* (see lower right corner for pitiful picnic). These are richly confrontational images. They present a literate and liberal viewership with the distasteful thought that we are scared, not yet running scared, but scared to our back teeth.

I think I am alone in this viewpoint, but I was not at ease with Goldblatt's new series that puts perpetrators back at the scene of their crime. I was left wondering, at what point did Goldblatt-the-photographer's life, intersect with that of Cinto-the-murderer's, other than vicariously.

I have a high regard for Nicholas Hlobo's installations. His works address issues of the black male body through a consideration of self-inflicted pain (scarification) and circumcision. His 2006 work *Isisindo SamaDlozi* is a case in point. Here his trademark use of rubber inner tubes, ribbons (and a spring balance) coheres into a remarkably challenging ensemble. His new work *Impundulu Zonke Ziyandilandela* ("all the lightning birds are after me") presented at VB 54, is huge by comparison. The "lightning bird" is a mythological creature with a penchant for throwing down lightning bolts and an appetite for blood. Hlobo's *Impundulu* features antelope horns and a veritable shower of blood. Although the work is possessed of a feral non-conformity, it seemed unfinished. The neck of this wondrous, wounded half vulture, half vampire, was a maze of wooden struts and oversize, galvanised bolts.

Palazzo Bembo: Personal Structures

Another South African to be curated onto VB 54 (but not as part of the pavilion show) is Andrew Putter. Both curators of *Personal Structures* were present when I visited and I was able to ask Karlyn de Jongh and Sarah Gold how they justified combining the work of more-or-less traditional ceramicist Ma Jun with that of Carl Andre (flat metal plates on the floor) and Andrew Putter (a video work entitled *Secretly I will Love You More*). They reasoned that the artists included in the exhibition were all inclined in some way or another to situate their practice relative to Time, Space and Existence. This is very broad. Putter's video installation, first seen at Spier Contemporary 2007 (where it won a prize), was displayed in a narrow alcove at the end of a passageway. The viewer was thus left alone to listen to Maria van Riebeeck intoning a lullaby to Krotoa when she was a child in the van Riebeeck household. A beautiful work.

Some Selected Toppings

Top prize, known as the Golden Lion, for the best artist in the *ILLUMInations* exhibition went to the American artist, Christian Marclay, for his work *The Clock*. This mesmerising montage runs to twenty-four hours and comprises clips from well-known feature and television films. Golden Lion for the best national pavilion went to Germany for *Christoph Schlingensief* (presented by Christoph Schlingensiefel and curated by Susanna Gaensheimer). This posthumous, complex set of exhibitions draws from the artist's work in theatre, film and his opera school in Burkina Faso. His Fluxus oratorio *Church of Fear vs. the Alien Within* dealt with the cancer that claimed his life at forty-nine. Silver Lion for most promising artist went to British artist Haroon Mirza, for his two works involving light and sound. Finally two Special Mentions were made, one to the Lithuanian pavilion and one to Swedish artist Klara Lidén for "her wit and rage". She showed ten dustbins collected from around the world.

1. <http://angelafloresjr.multiply.com/journal/item/8151>
 2. Information provided by Monna Mokoena's media and public relations officer in Venice.
 3. Bice Curiger is a curator at Kunsthau Zurich. In 1984 she co-founded *Parkett*, and remains its editor. She is also publishing director of *Tate* etc.
 4. Official press release, La Biennale di Venezia, 54th Esposizione Internazionale d'Arte, 2011.
 5. Curator's note, <http://sa-venice-biennale.com/sa-pavilion/>.
 6. See website for *Tra: Edge of Becoming*, <http://www.tra-expo.com/>.
 7. Curator's note: <http://sa-venice-biennale.com/sa-pavilion/>.
 8. Interview with Mike Nelson, <http://venicebiennale.britishcouncil.org/>.
 9. *Gloria: Allora & Calzadilla*. Catalogue of the exhibition, United States Department of State, 2011.
 10. <http://www.imamuseum.org/venice/about/exhibition/algorithm>.
 11. This is my opinion. His gallery hung the works for him and they are happy with the interaction between Sosnowska's "destabilising" structure and the works on the wall.

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