

The 9th International Cairo Biennial:

Review and critical remarks on the structure and background of the Biennial and its organizers.

By Iolanda Pensa | Jan 2004



Photos

A serious-looking fifty-year-old man is walking around the International Cairo Biennial of contemporary art with a raincoat and a balloon in his hands. He dribbles past the old pyramids, smoothly slides on sand (spread here and there probably to evoke Oriental deserts), and observes in a

puzzled way some images of horses hanging on the walls. The pink balloon that is walking along with him like a flag carries a quotation in Arabic from Anais Nin "We don't see things as they are. We see them as we are." Cominciamo bene.

Nine editions of the Cairo Biennial: amazing! So many despite such difficult health conditions! The Cairo Biennial is ailing, because it is more interesting from a political and social point of view than from an artistic one (in particular as far as the Egyptian and Arab participation is concerned).

The best of the Biennial

Anyway, let's start with the most interesting artworks. Johanna Kandl's balloons (Austrian pavilion) are without doubt the best idea of the exhibition: they float among the public, slip into conspiracies, and lighten the atmosphere, making people look ridiculous. On each balloon, there is a quotation in Arabic, weighty enough to make you feel wise when you carry it and embarrassed when you can't read it.

Rashid Rana's "This picture is not at Rest" (pavilion of Pakistan) is an image created from a reassuring Swiss landscape poster, one of those you can buy on the street in Pakistan to decorate your living room. The poster was digitally modified: from a distance you can enjoy the bright colors of those Alpine meadows, but at closer quarters you may notice little artificial windows made from TV news stills, traces of another contemporary world hidden amidst this familiar and idyllic peace.

Lisa Schiess (Swiss pavilion) explores and mixes in "Ma Bohème" music, sounds, poetry, and images from Switzerland and Egypt, using videos, concerts, projections, texts and a CD; the piece is interesting because it was created in Cairo, but the paradox is that the Federal Commission (the organizers of the Swiss pavilion) didn't encourage or support it in any way; they just decided to present it in the Biennial since the artist was already in town.

In his site specific pavilion, the American artist Paul Pfeiffer shows small and large videos – both in projections and on screens – in a sequence of baroque fragments, triumphs, and defeats caught in contemporary symbolic temples: fitness studio and couch, where everybody sooner or later ends up; at the end of the room, the sun is ready to rise or to set, but it is motionless like a lump in somebody's throat.

In one of the exhibition basements, "Unstable Habitat" by Marcelo Salvioli and Federico Neder (Argentinean pavilion) looks like an authentic Biennial room, upside-down and in shambles: probably an unexpected effect, but a really happy and appropriate one in the context of this show.

How it works

I talked about "pavilions", but this term is probably not so clear. The Cairo Biennial (born in 1984 and open to participants outside the Arab world from 1986 onwards) is modeled on the Venice Biennial: there are national pavilions (organized by the different national representatives), honorary guests (selected by the higher committee), and special invitations (also selected by the higher committee); these are all presented in the three biennial exhibition buildings (Opera House, Akhnaton Gallery, and Gezira Arts Centre), with labels specifying the artists' name, nationality, and category (pavilion, honorary guests and special invitation). The consequence is that it is very difficult to understand who has selected whom, whose is the merit, and whose the fault. This doesn't seem to bother the organizers (officially called "the higher committee"), since all the artists and curators have to abide by the manifesto of Commissaire Général Ahmed Fouad Selim (this year on mythology). Every work must be submitted to the organizers' judgment and may be removed at any time should it not reflect the prestige of the Biennial or hurt religious sensitivity.

The Biennial regulations (on Cairo Biennial CD-ROM 2003) provide some useful hints in order to understand the political and social implications of the show. Article 3 reads "in accordance with the UN Charter, international

law, and the Arab League Charter, States that violate the sovereignty of other countries, occupy foreign territory by force, or tolerate and support violators and occupiers will not be allowed to take part in the Cairo International Biennial". It is because of this article that Israel was never invited to the Biennial and from this article we may also understand why "The Biennial is an important venue for the dialogue between the U.S. and the Islamic World" – as stated in the press communiqué of the American Embassy in Cairo (12/11/2003). The United States spend a lot of money to cut a good figure and they are the only country to actually have a pavilion, which is created by a team of technicians especially imported from the U.S.: the pavilion can be outdoors (like for Judith Barry's video projections in 2001) or is roofed over (like the room built inside a room for Paul Pfeiffer's solo-show).

Another pavilion that deserves a look is the Italian one. The countries participating in the Biennial receive an official invitation from the Egyptian Foreign Ministry and are requested to select and propose their artists. Austria, for example, has a commission of experts, who choose a curator to select the artist. The Fund for U.S. Artists calls on curators and institutions for proposals and then selects the American representative through its scientific committee, which takes into account "the mutual understanding and respect between the U.S. and the host country" and doesn't tolerate proposals from commercial galleries, self proposals, or personal links between the curators and the artists. Italy in its turn has Mr. Carmine Siniscalco, who selects Italian artists for all Egyptian biennials and triennials, organizes exhibitions of Italian artists in Egypt and Egyptian artists in Italy; he is the director of Studio S, a commercial gallery in Rome and is the personal gallery of the artist and Egyptian Minister of Culture, Farouk Hosni.

Who owns it?

A documentary film presented on the official Cairo Biennial CD-ROM is a perfect reflection of the exhibition. The image shakes, totters, wobbles, and rolls, but never loses touch with the true protagonists of the event:

not the artworks of course, but the Egyptian Minister of Culture and his eager court, including the higher committee.

It seems that no one has much to say about the organization of the Cairo Biennial, since it has taken place for almost 20 years more or less in the same way. The Minister of Culture seems happy, the president of Egypt, Mohammed Hosni Mubarak, seems happy – and as for the foreign art audience, even if it is not happy, who cares! – it doesn't come again anyway, and the public... The public? The organizers are responsible for press and communications. "The Biennial is a secret" – says Moataz Nasr – "The organizers have the means to be the only voice and they tell us that we are the best. We live in a big lie".

The organizers of the Cairo Biennial are also more or less identical with the people, who direct and sometimes participate in the exhibitions of the Egyptian pavilion at the Venice and Sao Paulo Biennials. The Egyptian and international artists selected for the Cairo Biennial as for those pavilions represent the taste, dynamics, and limitations of a group of people currently occupying the highest positions in Egyptian Cultural institutions; but there is a lot more art in this country.

In Cairo there is a lot more than this

Looking at exhibitions and projects such as "Going Places", until March 2004; "PhotoCairo", Townhouse Gallery, 14 Dec. 2003 - 7 Jan. 2004; "Tabla Dubb" and "The Supreme Council", by Hassan Khan (two performances presented during "PhotoCairo"), "Two Days to Apocalypse" by Basim Magdy (a video projection organized by Aleya Hamza at the Falaki Gallery), the panel discussion on the Cairo Biennial promoted by Moataz Nasr at the Cultural Centre Al Sawi (Dec. 18-19, 2003) and "The Workshop 4" (a workshop on new media organized by Shady El Noshokaty for the students of the National Arts Faculty in Gezira), we easily understand that many Egyptian artists and curators are aware of the limits and faults of the Cairo Biennial, and they propose alternatives: in 2001, Al Nitaq Festival (with its huge number of exhibitions) was a good demonstration of the

richness and liveliness of the Cairo art scene, but this year it didn't take place and was really missing. Our perception of contemporary art in Egypt does not deserve to be completely ruined by the low quality of its Biennial and at the same time, contemporary artists in Egypt deserve the attention that biennials normally bring.

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