

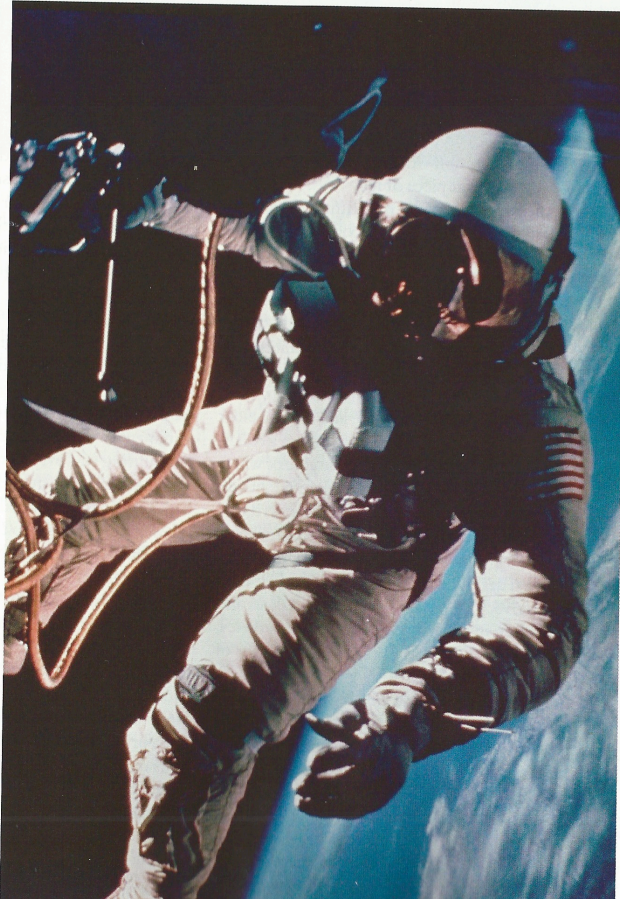
THOMAS DANE GALLERY

VENICE 2013

# Predicaments of Culture

OKWUI ENWEZOR

Below: Steve McQueen, *Once upon a Time*, 2002, 116 35-mm slides digitized for projection, sound, 70 minutes. From "The Encyclopedic Palace."



11 DUKE STREET, ST JAMES'S, LONDON SW1Y 6BN

TEL +44 (0)20 7925 2505 FAX +44 (0)20 7925 2506 [info@thomasdane.com](mailto:info@thomasdane.com)

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**UNDER THE RUBRIC** “The Encyclopedic Palace,” curator Massimiliano Gioni has proposed a tantalizing vision for the Venice Biennale: Forsaking the field of art as the locus and playground of commerce, financial speculation, and inflated economic value, the grand international exhibition’s fifty-fifth iteration instead attends faithfully to the complex terrain of pure imaginative invention. Two tracks of thinking are immediately apparent in Gioni’s thesis. The first focuses on the microcosmologies of “outsiders,” while the second develops along a more conventional path of ethnographic realism. Spread across two venues—the Giardini’s Central Pavilion and the Arsenale—and freed of any requirement to adhere strictly to the

category of art, myriad exemplars of each of these interests permit an in-depth exploration of the wild imagination at work. Yet the pedantic degree to which Gioni has prosecuted his thesis, with clever turns between the studied and the spontaneous, has ensured that the exhibition is more like a closed system, an airless corridor into the historical past rather than a conduit propelling us into a historical present replete with fresh insights into the nature of creation and invigorating possibilities for ongoing invention.

As I perused the Biennale’s sprawling dual show, I couldn’t help thinking about two poetry anthologies that I have read avidly over the years, *Shaking the Pumpkin: Traditional Poetry of the Indian North*

*Americas* (1972) and *Technicians of the Sacred: A Range of Poetries from Africa, America, Asia, Europe & Oceania* (1968). These books, both compiled by Jerome Rothenberg, offer bracing encounters with visionary practitioners from across the world whose abilities to conjure the spirit world and reimagine reality were neither limited by geography nor constrained by cultural tradition.

Rothenberg’s interest in the mechanics of trans-cultural poetic expression exemplifies a practice he calls *ethnopoetics*. This idea fascinates me, not least because it makes available the riches of poetic traditions beyond the Western canons, thus complicating our sense of how the world is imagined across cul-

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tures. Attempts in the visual arts have been made in this direction as well, with mixed results. When I first encountered the two anthologies, Jean-Hubert Martin’s seminal show of non-Western art at the Centre Pompidou, “*Magiciens de la terre*” (“Magicians of the Earth”—doesn’t its title sound a lot like *Technicians of the Sacred?*), had yet to be conceived. And in 1984, five years before that Paris exhibition, a raucous jousting between critic Thomas McEvelley and MOMA curators William Rubin and Kirk Varnedoe raged on the pages of *Artforum* in connection with the *succès de scandale* that was “‘Primitivism’ in 20th Century Art: Affinity of the Tribal and the Modern.” The back-and-forth between the critic and his curatorial interlocutors revealed an important schism in the two camps’ respective views on otherness, modernism, power, and non-Western traditions of art as played out in the presentation and reception of the various ethnographic objects and artworks that had been convened at the temple of modernism on West Fifty-Third Street. I believe this was the path that Gioni aimed to take in celebrating the acute dissonance, profuse irreverence, and unrelenting obsessiveness of the artists, objects, and images he pressed into service for his version of art and otherness in Venice.

Though the exhibition is hardly encyclopedic, it is nevertheless a strikingly original deviation from its predecessors. In places, the show offers moments of vivid, neo-ethnographic exuberance. To my mind, Gioni’s exhibition in the Arsenale was by far the better of the two. Juxtapositions of works by younger

artists—most of them in digital formats, such as Camille Henrot’s syncopated video remix of creation myths from around the world (*Grosse Fatigue*, 2013) and Neil Beloufa’s adjacent nocturnal video *Kempinski*, 2007, filmed in Mali and featuring stream-of-consciousness recitations by vernacular astronomers and urban griots spouting legends of otherworldly travels—resonated powerfully. Some of the footage in the multiscreen installation of 16-mm films by João Maria Gusmão and Pedro Paiva reminded me of Jean Rouch’s *Les Maitres fous* (The Mad Masters, 1955). Down the enfilade of white (and black) boxes that run the length of the Corderie, works expand on ideas related to creation stories, origins, myths, legends, or individual cosmologies. Steve McQueen’s *Once upon a Time*, 2002, a digital slide show documenting the history of humankind as seen in the future (as imagined in the NASA time capsule that was the source of the projection’s 116 images), is one such work; Ryan Trecartin and Lizzie Fitch’s frenetic constellation of new videos another. Yet all these examples of fresh and engaging work do not, unfortunately, add up to a majority of the show.

**THIS YEAR**, if many of the national pavilions seem adrift, uninspiring, and sadly craft-oriented, there are nevertheless a number of standouts so persuasive that, for me, they elevate the Biennale as a whole: Sarah Sze’s detailed, microscopic view of the world implanted in the US pavilion is perhaps the strongest and most confident treatment of that space I have

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seen in years. Koki Tanaka's sensitive reappraisal of Japanese society in the aftermath of the tsunami that triggered the Fukushima nuclear disaster is one of the rare pavilions reflecting a political view. Likewise a treatment of aftermaths, Lara Almarcegui's rubble-filled Spanish pavilion references the ruins, both literal and metaphoric, created by the financial crisis in Spain, and provides a clear antidote to the rampant escapism offered up in "The Encyclopedic Palace." Simryn Gill removed a portion of the Australian pavilion's roof, opening the structure up to the elements (rain, air, light) and to local flora and fauna (dead leaves, mold, birds, insects). In the pavilion's wan light after a rainstorm that shortly preceded my arrival, the intended entropy of the work was beginning to set in, while photographs installed in the space of giant open-pit mines in Australia projected a lugubrious, postapocalyptic landscape.

Keyed toward this perceptual scrutiny of fleeting life and temporality while intimating a different presence of entropy is Dayanita Singh's installation in the German pavilion (somewhat confusingly located, this year, in the French pavilion). Her slide projections and film infuse the space with an air of tender fragility and the potency of memory as one watches the endless bundles and archives that fill the rooms of Indian and colonial bureaucracy melt into one another in her sequence of black-and-white photographs. Memory, place, and narration are also central concerns of the surprising work on view in the Czech Republic/Slovakia pavilion, which pairs Petra Feriancová's installation of vitrines loaded with

neo-ethnographic sculptures, masks, shells, and photographs and Zbyněk Baladrán's video montage of archival film footage. Ostensibly about Venice's history, *Liberation or . . .*, 2013, feels like an allegory of distant and forgotten landscapes, its disquieting and plaintive mood suggesting the expansiveness of a travelogue. The essayistic and diaristic text accompanying the film is delivered by a male narrator who affects the diction of an ethnographer.

The Polish and Romanian pavilions, too, resonate profoundly—indeed literally in the case of Poland, which chimes in with Konrad Smoleński's composition for two large iron bells amplified to exhilarating (or disconcerting) effect by two earthshaking towers of subwoofers (*Everything Was Forever, Until It Was No More*, 2013). Romania is represented by Alexandra Pirici and Manuel Pelmuş, who have assembled teams of performers to pantomime the history of the Biennale via one hundred "reenactments" of works (mostly paintings and sculpture) from previous editions of the exhibition. Those *tableaux vivants* are only slightly more ephemeral than the rousingly precarious structure of the DIY Georgian pavilion located at the terminus of the Arsenale.

Unfortunately, I missed the Angolan pavilion with the Luanda-based photographer Edson Chagas, but the surprise Golden Lion awarded to that effort made it clear that this year in Venice belongs to the pavilions not usually at the center of things. This is good for the Venice Biennale—and great for contemporary art. □

OKWUI ENWEZOR IS THE DIRECTOR OF HAUS DER KUNST IN MUNICH.