

Reality Show

Blake Gopnik

Contemporary art has found a strong voice in a telling moment of truth.

We're at a surprisingly good moment for contemporary art. Looking back over a decade's worth of art criticism, I've begun to recognize that, despite the torrent of failures I've panned, there has also been a steady trickle of art I've loved.

That look back was triggered by what's coming up: the 53rd Venice Biennale, the most venerable, prestigious and sprawling of shows, which launches today with exhibitions from 77 countries (which we'll be reviewing daily this week) and an immense group show (which we'll sum up with). As always, the Biennale is certain to set out plenty of junk. And a handful of gems.

If the good work follows the past decade's trend, a lot of it will have close ties to reality. The real has always been important territory for artists. The difference now is that while most of the more arty, "imaginative" options are looking tired, the "new realism," if we dare call it that, seems to be gaining ground. It's as likely to tweak and distort the world as to record it faithfully. It digs more deeply than ever before into what reality, and its documentation, can mean to us.

Fabricated realities

Some of the very best of today's art looks real but documents a fabricated world where something is not right.

Aernout Mik, a brilliant Dutch artist who was one of the standouts at the last Venice Biennale in 2007, sort of stages moments of crisis, then sort of documents the result. In his first American solo, now at the Museum of Modern Art in New York, his silent videos show us bedlam in a council room, conflict in a trade school and chaos on a trading floor.

In each case, Mik has created the setting, then hired actors to improvise absurdities around the barest framework of plot.

Mik relies on the techniques of high-end documentaries to avoid the dismissible, fantastic feel of art. His uncanny trick is to make us pay the same attention to his fictions as we would to real life.

A few other artists work a bit like Mik. Last year in Washington, the Hirshhorn Museum showed "Godville," a stunning video installation it owns by the Israeli artist Omer Fast, who was a star at the last Whitney Biennial in 2008. He manipulated the audio from a series of interviews with the reenactors at Colonial Williamsburg so that they sound straightforward, but the disjointed video makes clear that the result is manipulated.

Christian Jankowski, a former Biennialist who works in New York and Berlin, has staged and taped an "industry conference" attended entirely by television's most famous puppets, whom he got to deadpan for a panel on "the state of puppetry in the mass media." (Lambchop's contributions were not entirely cogent.)

All these works view the world through the same lens that delivers it to us on TV news, in magazines, in documentaries -- even in the newspaper. Except that in these artists' version of this media transaction, the manipulation is made explicit; nothing is as it seems. What are we supposed to make, for instance, of puppets engaged in sober discussion on the state of puppetry, when we know that every word they say is literally being put into their mouths?

These artworks don't preach about the failure of communication in our mediated world. They just arrange to have their own communications fail in subtle ways, and let us wallow in their failure.

Uncomfortably Real

Another promising direction for contemporary realism: Avoid fiction entirely, but present a real-life situation that's almost too strange to believe.

Document a choir of deaf mutes, for instance, whom you've taught to grunt out Bach. Or record the activists for violently opposing causes -- gay rights, reactionary Catholicism, far-right Polish nationalism and far-left international socialism -- whom you've brought together to peacefully (you wish) deface each other's symbols. Those situations have been set up and recorded by Polish artist Artur Zmijewski.

Zmijewski's video of those four "interest groups" is included in a current show in Boston called "Acting Out: Social Experiments in Video" that documents this trend. It also features a video by Glasgow artist Phil Collins (a star at Pittsburgh's last Carnegie International) that records a true-life laughing contest, staged by Collins. (Watching people forcing themselves to laugh turns out to be more grim than funny.)

All these pieces are part of a "what if" tradition in fine art that dates back to the first painting that depicted an imaginary scene. The difference is that now the thought experiments of painting can become real experiments, recorded as they're tested on real people.

A realer reality

Some contemporary artists are simply looking long and steady at the world around them, then reporting back on it to all the rest of us. Realism has never been conceived quite as straightforwardly as now, with a minimum of distracting, self-conscious artiness. Video and photography can try on -- or at least fake -- a style-free directness that handmade painting has never been able to claim.

Washingtonians who head to the lower level of the Sackler Gallery right now can see a video installation by Fiona Tan, an artist of Chinese and Australian descent who will be representing the Netherlands in Venice this year. The Sackler piece documents young Japanese women practicing an ancient form of archery. Tan's camera dwells on fancy hair ornaments and lovely kimonos and sashes, but also on tensed necks when an arrow is released. You could build a message or a moral into the piece: That it's about the spirit (all that concentration) vs. matter (the fancy get-ups, the elaborate up-dos); the female (makeup and flawless beauty) vs. the male (the warlike sport). But the crucial thing is that the piece doesn't do any of that message-building for you. It just hands you content on a plate.

The British artist Tacita Dean, who looks set to be one of the leading artists of our time, has made a career of such apparently straightforward documentation. In a solo show in 2001, again at the Hirshhorn, she screened films of animals reacting to a solar eclipse in Cornwall, and of newly free East Germans enjoying a revolving restaurant on top of a TV tower in Berlin.

Her spring exhibition -- with Marian Goodman, a veteran who continues to be one of New York's most clued-in dealers -- included a film that explored a famous installation by Joseph Beuys in a German museum. Except that Dean had chosen to shoot every detail in the gallery other than Beuys's actual work, preferring the overlooked to the more obviously camera-worthy. But Dean's work doesn't tell us what we ought to be looking for, or how to interpret whatever we find.

Fine-art photography has also moved toward "straight" documentation. Chan Chao, from Washington, got into the 2002 Whitney Biennial on the basis of his foursquare shots of people on the Burmese border. His latest show, at G Fine Art near Logan Circle, gave a similarly direct view of women in a Peruvian prison.

This trend is obviously not new: Photography has always wanted to document the world, and German conceptualist Hans-Peter Feldman, an under-recognized genius who's in this year's Biennale, has been digging deep into how such documentation works at least since the early 1970s. Now, however, the documentary impulse has finally moved from the sidelines of photographic and conceptual art to the center of contemporary creativity.

The point of all this artistic documentation isn't simply to make us more knowledgeable, the way a TV documentary might. Instead, it shows us how perplexing the world really is. Duchamp took a hat rack and said, "Here, it's art, deal with it." Chan Chao does the same thing with women in a Peruvian prison.

For very nearly a century, jokester dada and sober realism have mostly been thought of as occupying opposite ends of the artistic spectrum. That circle seems about to close.

So real you can eat it

The dada spirit is especially alive in certain cutting-edge "realists" who think even the most straightforward snapshot is still too much like fine art for its own good. They want to make real things happen in the real world, with no recording step involved and no object left over to show or sell. (The French philosopher Nicolas Bourriaud has dubbed what they're up to "relational aesthetics," a tag that some of them dislike -- but what artists ever like the tags they get?)

The most famous of these innovators is Rirkrit Tiravanija, an Argentine-born Thai who has already done three stints at the Biennale. Tiravanija, who won the Smithsonian's big Lucelia award in 2003, is most famous for the Thai curries he cooks in museums and galleries -- with the whole social experience of the unexpected meal in an unexpected place counting as his art, and the food itself as just one of its supplies. He's in the main group show at this year's Biennale.

This "social" art will be in Washington all summer and fall. Vesela Sretenovic, the Phillips Collection's ambitious new curator of contemporary art, has invited a group of New York artists called the dBfoundation to occupy its newly reopened cafe, and to "activate" it on the first Thursday evening of each month. One member of the group, Elaine Tin Nyo, refers to their work, titled "this is not that CAFÉ," as "a metacafe that's inhabiting the real cafe that's here. . . . It's a stealth environment."

On opening night in May, Nyo's contribution was meta-food: Every table gets a dada-ish menu that includes art-themed non-foods that are not being served in the cafe, such as "Cezanne Salad (of Apples, Oranges and Drapery)." This doesn't have the anti-object rigor of high-tone relational aesthetics, and she doesn't want it to, she says. "We just throw parties. . . . I just do this."

Her partners in the dB project do other things: Tom Russotti has put some homemade board games into the cafe, alongside notebooks where visitors can scribble down the rules they've dreamed up for playing them. Where traditional games involve passively following rules, these turn visitors into artists by letting them be inventive.

Another dB "intervention" is a bookshelf filled with cafe-appropriate books contributed by various authors. One week in May, they were shelved according to how far the publisher is from Washington. Another week, they were sorted by the number of pages in them.

As Sretenovic puts it, the project is about getting art, the museum and the audience "to function in new ways" so as to reveal "how art and life intersect."

In the best art being made today, they come closer than ever before.

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