

# **BEARING THE LIGHTNESS OF BEING: THE 54<sup>TH</sup> VENICE BIENNALE INTERNATIONAL ART EXHIBITION, VENICE, ITALY, 2011**

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ILLUMInations, the title of the 54<sup>th</sup> Venice Biennale International Art Exhibition, sparks a number of associations relating to art production and contemporary politics. As a whole, the word implies a kind of spiritual or intellectual enlightenment, which is reinforced through the accentuation of the first part of the word. The notion of light is a classical theme in art, commencing with the Illuminated manuscripts produced by monks during the twelfth century – an attempt to illuminate the masses by bringing them Christianity – to the philosophical interpretation of light during the Age of Enlightenment – the surge of scientific discovery and reason that ultimately fuelled later inventions such as the light bulb. The Modern period was ushered in through the development of photography – a means of inscribing a fragment of reality onto paper with light – which, in turn, rendered naturalistic representation obsolete and prompted artistic experiments with light as it became the subject of numerous Impressionist canvases.

This expression of light within art historical contexts is most evident in Urs Fischer's<sup>1</sup> installation, *Untitled* (2011). The seemingly unrelated life-size candle sculptures

(which remained lit throughout the entirety of the exhibition) slowly disintegrate as they burn up from the inside out. The installation comprises three sculptures, including a replica of the Baroque artist Giovanni Bologna's marble sculpture, *The Rape of the Sabine Women* (1583), flanked by a portrait of the artist Rudolf Stingel (Fischer's friend) and Fischer's own studio chair (Stokes 2011:178). The referencing of candles and, by implication, the dramatic play on shadow and light echoes notions of *momento mori* and, as the pieces gradually melt away into formless, uncontrolled streams of wax, only to congeal again, the installation hovers between life and death, light and dark. The transience of the artwork, coupled with religious connotations of the materials, constitutes an ephemeral reflection on human life. In much the same sense the art historical references suggest contemplation of originality and authenticity akin to the notion of Walter Benjamin's *aura*.

The accent on the suffix, *nations*, conjures up contemporary political associations of globalisation, identity and heritage. This is not only expected when contemplating an exhibition of this nature, but also reinforced



**Figure 1:** Christian Boltanski, *Wheel of Fortune* (2011). Installation, French Pavilion Venice Biennale 2011. Photograph by the author

by the national pavilions showcasing collective artistic endeavours of numerous countries. The French Pavilion, entitled *Chance*, showcases an installation by Christian Boltanski<sup>2</sup> which offers the viewer an opportunity to become part of the artwork and, through active participation, becomes an illuminated subject. The Neo-classical-styled building is sharply contrasted by the gleaming scaffolding that forms a maze through which the audience is guided and prompts questions relating to popular culture and human behaviour within this given paradigm. The large mechanical structure, entitled *Wheel of Fortune* (2011) (Figure 1), transports reels of paper emblazoned with hundreds of newborn faces that randomly stops from time to time. The haphazardly selected portrait is illuminated on an oversized screen and accompanied by an alarm signalling fate's choice. The mechanised structure is supported by two

digital clocks entitled *Last News from Humans* (2011) (Figure 2), which counts the world's population: the deaths are displayed in red, juxtaposed by the figure (vastly more than the death toll) of those born on the day, in green. In addition to this, *Be New* (2011) consists of a number of blocks projected on a screen rapidly succeeding fragments of both infant and elderly faces. The interactive piece challenges viewers to click a button at the exact moment when a face is in its complete state (Martin 2011:357). Boltanski's construction leaves the viewer with a sense of belonging to a global nation, but he also highlights the role of the individual within these socio-political structures.

The visible division of the word, by implication, also implies perceptions of boundaries, divisions and binaries – a double meaning reinforced by the notion that



**Figure 2:** Christian Boltanski, *Wheel of Fortune* (2011). Installation, French Pavilion Venice Biennale 2011. Photograph by the author

when one particular subject is literally under the spotlight, the remainder falls in the dark. Constructs are further enhanced by the unexpected inclusion of a number of paintings by the Baroque artist, Tintoretto, amidst a collection of works claiming their contemporaneity through the reputation of the Venice Biennale as a progressive showcase of current artistic practice. Tintoretto is known for his masterful depiction of light and the citation of his paintings by a number of artists on the exhibition certainly sets up an interesting dialogue between current and historical artistic expression (Curiger 2011:49).

Nicholas Hlobo's<sup>3</sup> larger than life mythological creature entitled *limpundulu Zonke Ziyandilandela (All the Lighting Birds are after Me)* (2011) presents the audience with a richly crafted layering of various texts,

including a piece by Tintoretto. The theatrical piece combines fragments of rubber tyre, ribbon and found objects affixed in the shape of a bird hanging from the roof, accompanied by a recording of the artist singing to the backtrack of a thunderstorm. The superimposition of duality is immediate: male and female, black and white, myth and reality. The piece quotes *The Creation of the Animals* (1550–1553), one of the Tintoretto pieces included on exhibition that illustrates the Old Testament tale of creation. Hlobo presents the *limpundulu* vampire bird as known in Xhosa mythology and explains that folk tale suggests that upon the appearance of the bird an individual is confronted with his or her own mortality, owing to the terror it induces (Sharpe 2011:206). Given the context of Hlobo's *oeuvre*, the vampire bird functions as a conglomerate of the many myths sustained within a post-apartheid South

Africa ranging from racial and sexual identity to the HIV/AIDS crisis and ethnic politics. Relying on the Kantian notion of the sublime,<sup>4</sup> the vampire bird renders subjects illuminated as meaning is revealed between the crevices of rational thought and cultural beliefs.

Although the emphasis on borders and contradiction appear ill-suited to an exhibition of this nature – in fact, many past exhibitions have been criticised for exactly this reason – it becomes evident through the “lack”<sup>5</sup> of curatorship and open-ended interpretation of the theme throughout the exhibition that meaning is instead located between these constructs rather than through it. The title suggests an ephemeral and transient notion of elucidation juxtaposed by the real world of socio-political dimensions. It could be understood, then, that meaning, which is simultaneously individualized and global, past and present, light and shadow and real and virtual, is drifting between constructs not unlike the geographical location upon which the exhibition itself is installed. Bice Curiger (2011:43), the Director of the 54<sup>th</sup> Venice Biennale International Art Exhibition, underscores this notion of hybridity when she explains that *ILLUMInations* does not seek to promote a singular perspective, but instead sheds light on the ‘plurality of current perspectives’.

Voted as the best artwork on the Venice Biennale Exhibition, winning a Golden Lion, Christian Marclay’s<sup>6</sup> *The Clock* (2010) captures the simultaneity of the past and present. This 24-hour video collage weaves a myriad of filmic quotations referencing specific time (Herbert 2011:225). Each fragment of time in Marclay’s piece corresponds with the real time and thus creates a liminal space where viewers are enmeshed in both the present and the past. Apart from the technical excellence of this piece, *The Clock* managed to level the space-time

continuum of the entire exhibition by presenting audiences with a slice of nostalgia combined with the sophistication expected of a post-millennium period.

The works on display are most certainly rooted in a deeply philosophical and contemplative mode intended to provoke dialogue between artists, viewers and nations. Given our contemporary condition of virtual worlds and simulated lives, this exhibition unquestionably serves our humanist notions and engenders thoughts about our (dis)embodied selves. It is furthermore suggested, through the numerous references made to art history that perhaps the lightness of being human lies, in fact, in the illumination produced through artistic expression.

## Notes

- 1 Urs Fischer was born in Zurich, Switzerland in 1973 and currently lives and works in New York, USA.
- 2 Christian Boltanski was born in Paris, France in 1944 and currently lives and works in Malakoff, France.
- 3 Nicholas Hlobo was born in Cape Town, South Africa in 1975 and currently lives and works in Johannesburg, South Africa.
- 4 Immanuel Kant in *The Critique of Judgment* (2007: 72-83) defines the differentiates between the notion of the sublime and that of beauty by suggesting that the former relies not only on that which is appealing, but also accompanied by the terrifying and the great – a ‘negative pleasure’.
- 5 It is important to note that Curiger is referred to as the director of the exhibition instead of the curator, which furthermore strengthens the “lack” of selection and premeditated statements promoted by the pieces and instead propagates the notion of multiple

viewpoints, untainted by curatorial intentions of an individual.

- 6 Christian Marclay was born in San Rafael, USA in 1955 and currently lives and works in London, Great Britain and New York, USA.

## References

Curiger, B. 2011. Illuminations, in *Illuminations. 54<sup>th</sup> Venice Biennale International Art Exhibition*. Venice: Marsilio:43-57.

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