

# Omnivore's Dilemma

FRANCESCO BONAMI TALKS WITH MASSIMILIANO GIONI ABOUT THE UPCOMING 55TH VENICE BIENNALE



From left: Rudolf Steiner, untitled, 1923, chalk on paper, 40 1/4 x 60 1/4". From the series "Wandtafelzeichnungen zum Vortragswerk" (Lecture Blackboard Drawings), 1919-24. Norbert Ghisoland, 64094, ca. 1925-28, gelatin silver print, 11 x 7 1/2".



From the "Family of Man" to the "Museum Without Walls," the vision of a sweeping integration of art and non-art, ancient and modern, canon and fringe, has haunted the history of the large-scale exhibition for at least half a century. This summer, curator MASSIMILIANO GIONI throws his hat into the ring with the Fifty-Fifth Venice Biennale, synoptically titled "The Encyclopedic Palace." Critic and curator FRANCESCO BONAMI, who helmed the 2003 Biennale, talks with Gioni about the upcoming show and its relationship to globalism, knowledge, anthropology, and idealism.

**FRANCESCO BONAMI:** So it's now twenty years after what we could call the first "real" Venice Biennale, curated by Achille Bonito Oliva in 1993. He was an old-fashioned curator, but in a way, with his show, the Biennale started to become a tool, an occasion, a strategic moment for curatorial practice, and a bellwether of an incredible ambition to globalize.

Today it looks as if that cycle is finished and that you are inaugurating what might be called the anti-Biennale. Not a biennial—that is, an international show organized around some grand theme or recent tendency—but simply a very, very big group exhibition.

**MASSIMILIANO GIONI:** Yes, maybe it's a reaction. Perhaps not even a conscious one, but I grew up in the 1990s and clearly saw biennials as machines that opened up geographies in a different way. So now we are used to seeing an international array of artists

at these shows; your 2003 Biennale, in fact, was the first to really address this international contingent, with the inclusion, for example, of a strong representation from the Middle East in the section created by Catherine David. And throughout the '90s, the proliferation of biennials productively redrew the maps and the hierarchies of contemporary art.

But I also think that after a while biennials became a free-for-all, more about a huge geographic network than anything else, and it became a little too predictable for me, or a little too tight, and so I started thinking about how biennials could work differently. In Gwangju, with "10,000 Lives" [Eighth Gwangju Biennale, 2010], I pursued an exhibition model that is close to what I think this Venice Biennale, "The Encyclopedic Palace," is going to be like: I attempted to conceive of the biennial as a temporary museum more than simply as a show that captures the supposed zeitgeist.

I don't know if this will be an anti-Biennale, but I hope it will be a kind of temporary museum dedicated to a set of topics.

**FB:** Regarding Venice in particular, at one point the discussion was all about how the national pavilions are obsolete. But the pavilions actually mirror the world: as a huge constellation of identities, nationalities, and nations. How do you see the Biennale now within this constellation?

**MG:** The idea that the pavilions are obsolete comes from a very partial understanding of the art world.

Clearly, the pavilions are not obsolete for the eighty-eight nations that are going to be in this edition. That's what makes Venice special: You have eighty-eight different ways of being contemporary. There is no other exhibition in the world that can give you that extreme diversity, for better or for worse. And being contemporary in Bahrain is obviously different from being contemporary in China or being contemporary at the Vatican, which has a pavilion this year. That's the real treasure of the Biennale, and it should be cultivated.

**"I wanted to acknowledge the link to the tradition of the universal exposition but also to suggest the failure of that model right from the beginning."**

—Massimiliano Gioni

Then there is a different question, which is how to make an international exhibition that somehow intersects with the pavilions. Paradoxically, I came to the conclusion that I had to make it less about being contemporary and more about the coexistence of diverse temporalities, since today being contemporary also means having access to history in a completely different manner. History is somehow more retrievable today than in the past.

**FB:** And how does that relate to "The Encyclopedic Palace"?



From left: Linda Fregni Nagler, *The Hidden Mother* (detail), 2006–13, 997 found daguerreotypes, tintypes, albumen prints, gelatin silver prints, dimensions variable. Walter De Maria, *Apollo's Ecstasy*, 1990, bronze. Installation view, Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam.

**MG:** The title comes from the self-taught Italian-American artist Marino Auriti, who conceived of his own impossible, imaginary museum: a building that would house all the knowledge in the world. Obviously his was a dream that remains only a model, a failed project. By using this title, and by looking at the figure of Auriti, I also hoped to connect to the history of Venice, because it's the oldest biennial; founded in 1895, it has its roots in the format of the world's fair, going back to the Great Exhibition of 1851. I wanted to acknowledge the link to the tradition of the universal exposition but also to suggest the failure of that model right from the beginning.

On many levels, the show is about the impossibility of knowing everything. It's a show about knowledge, specifically knowledge as represented through images; on the other hand, it's about how we have used images to learn about, and to represent our experience of, the world.

**FB:** So . . . your Biennale is doomed to fail. [laughter]

**MG:** Probably, yes. In that it will accept our inability to know everything. It's not a show that attempts to capture the entire world. I couldn't, and I didn't, set out to make it into a general investigation of art today or to represent all the geographies out there. That, I think, has been proved impossible.

But I'm curious to see whether the show captures a moment in time. There are so many works from the past, and works made by artists who are dead. And one of the main features of the show is the inclusion of outsider artists or self-taught artists, complicating the definition of what a professional artist is.

When you came to Gwangju, Francesco, you told me it was a show in which Jeff Koons looked like an outsider artist. I thought that was a strange compliment. [laughter] And maybe that argument will be taken a step further in Venice.

**FB:** Because of your increasing awareness that one cannot map the world, you didn't feel the need to travel extensively for the show. You realized that one can do a huge exhibition like the Biennale without having to go to every city on the planet—you can rely on other people as well. Once, the very point of being a curator of Documenta or of a Biennale was to travel as much as you could, but you've chosen, it seems, to rely on information rather than on experience for this installment.

**MG:** Roger Buergel once said that "miles and more" is not a curatorial method. The Lufthansa motto cannot become the only way in which research is carried out. I have worked with a group of advisers who helped me look at places I was less familiar with; I try to spend as much time with books as I do on airplanes.

**FB:** You have another curator within the exhibition.

**MG:** Yes. Cindy Sherman is creating a section within the show that we refer to as an anatomical theater. It's a reflection on the use of images to represent bodies. So it's a show within the show, in which Cindy has worked with artists she knows, found materials she likes, or included work by other artists that we discussed together.

Cindy's selection ranges from photographs by Norbert Ghisoland, who was a studio photographer in Belgium in the early twentieth century, to drawings on handkerchiefs, a tradition in American prisons, to the collection of the Italian-Swedish artist Linda

Fregni Nagler, who collects images—photographs and tintypes—of what she calls "hidden mothers."

**FB:** How much of the show is about curiosity?

How much about lived experience versus objective knowledge?

**MG:** I thought of Gwangju as a show about the relationship of people to images through portraiture, and about the idea of the image as memorial, as a place where you fight death, where you preserve the memory of people you love. This show will be more about the image as a tool for knowing the world—and what Hans Belting calls the internal image, the image we produce in our own minds, in an attempt to visualize the invisible, or dreams, or imagined things.

**FB:** Which is a distinctly anthropological understanding of the image, as something that is not purely objective but that hovers between physical and mental existence.

**MG:** Yes. How do you picture what you don't know? How do you envision the future? How do you create visualizations of abstract concepts? A key inclusion will be the blackboard drawings that Rudolf Steiner made for his lectures. He was a compulsive lecturer. He gave more than five thousand lectures over the course of his life. Apparently, he would even give lectures to people who were there just to fix his house, when they took a break. So these drawings are cosmographies or cosmologies of a sort, but they're also tools for explanation. They are instruments.

My hope is that, as you go through the show, the distinction between what is an artwork and what is a tool will be blurred. I don't like the expression, but the exhibition becomes a type of anthropological research in which the artwork and other forms of figurative expression are treated in a similar manner, which is frequently done in museums devoted to other periods and fields, but for some reason it's not something we do when it comes to contemporary art.

**FB:** How do you define the difference between those who are thinking outside art and those who are inside art? Where do you draw the line?

**MG:** Well, you don't. That's the point of the show. For me, the key is that the show becomes more about images in the broader sense and less about artworks. It doesn't matter to me whether Steiner is an artist and Walter De Maria is not. The question is whether the De Maria sculptures lead us to better understand our relationship to images and to knowledge.

The premise of the show is this type of confusion—bringing everything onto the level of image production and consumption, rather than observing the traditional distinctions between mere artworks and masterpieces, minor art, high art, and so on.

**FB:** But then you come to the big question: What, precisely, is the role of the curator? Increasingly, the curator has become the author, and the art becomes an artifact. *Everything* becomes an artifact; all is leveled. That's the legacy of Harald Szeemann. Your show seems to go in that direction, where all the artists,

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the artwork, the artifacts, the insider, the outsider—they're just pieces of your . . . palace.

**MG:** I think your question raises a few issues. One is the notion of the curator as author—an idea for which I have no sympathy, actually. And I'm not saying it out of false modesty. Szeemann himself used to say he was just a waiter.

On the other hand, if the Biennale looks like an art fair, then I have a problem with it. I think that's been the problem with the attitude toward curating a large-scale show, which has become: Anything goes, the bigger the better, and the works and the theme are both interchangeable.

But when you start talking about having three, four, five hundred thousand people in the audience, the show itself had better have some meaning as a whole. It's not a matter of authorship. It's a matter of responsibility. I am fascinated by the challenge of making a pedagogical show that isn't dry in a German-theme-show kind of way. *[laughter]*

**FB:** It does raise another question. You want to avoid geographic flattening, in which everything from everywhere is thrown in. But then how do you avoid that kind of flattening with respect to history? How do you achieve historical specificity? That is the challenge if you are adopting a *Wunderkammer*, or encyclopedic, approach.

**MG:** I don't know if there is going to be historical specificity. It goes back to what I was saying before in terms of the outsider versus the insider. As long as the objects preserve a distance, as long as they preserve a foreignness, then you don't have historical specificity, but you have a friction that I hope awakens the attention of the viewer, so that they don't just assimilate everything into a synchronic spectacle. The purpose of including materials of heterogeneous provenance, these unfamiliar objects, is partly to disrupt the flattening of the exhibition as one single narrative or one single point of view or taste. It's a type of abstraction or collage. The paradox is that it's called "The Encyclopedic Palace," but it's as far from the encyclopedia as can be. If anything, it has more to do with protoencyclopedias, and with the experience of knowledge as a system of connections and sympathies. It has to do more with Baroque theaters of memory or Jung's *Red Book* than with the French *encyclopédie*.

**FB:** What would such a theater of memory or of knowledge look like today?

**MG:** Well, they might resemble digital *Wunderkammer*, or computer desktops. In fact, the most famous theater of memory was invented in the late Renaissance by a Venetian, Giulio Camillo. And it's no coincidence that the monumental Venetian shipyards in the Arsenale, where part of the Biennale traditionally takes place, were factories of the marvelous. Throughout the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, the Arsenale functioned as a theater for a peculiar combination



From left: Page from Carl Gustav Jung's *The Red Book*, 1914–30, paper, ink, tempera, gold paint, red leather binding, closed 15 1/4 x 12 1/4 x 4". Melvin Moti, *Eigenlicht (Intrinsic Light)* (detail), 2012, still from the 18-minute, silent, color, 35-mm film component of a mixed-media installation additionally comprising six C-prints.

of technology and grandiosity. It's as though this tradition rubbed off against the exhibitions taking place there centuries later, where the large scale of the spaces often suggests grand gestures and all-encompassing installations. Personally, I wanted to move away from the Arsenale as a venue for this kind of theatricality, one that has become perhaps too specific to the biennial model.

**FB:** But there will be actual moments of theater in your exhibition, too.

**MG:** Yes, a few artists in the show will use theatrical stagings or, simply, live actors. But I think of these less as performances than as living sculptures. Tino Sehgal is making a new piece, comprising a *mise-en-scène* with other works in the main pavilion. It's on a smaller scale than his most recent works, but it is going to be quite intense. Ragnar Kjartansson is doing a project in the Arsenale that involves an ongoing musical performance with a sextet of horn players on a boat. John Bock is creating an installation that will include actors speaking in imaginary languages and what he calls a "house of maggots." And Marco Paolini, an Italian actor and writer, is going to tell stories.

It's very difficult to describe who Paolini is to an international audience. He is not going to even speak in English. But he became famous in Italy in the mid-'90s when he presented a play that reconstructed a famous disaster in Italy, the collapse of the Vajont Dam in 1963. He's always making work about specific, regional topics and working on this kind of reportage theater. In Venice, he's going to give a series of impromptu presentations about jobs that are disappearing, a lexicon of professions that are vanishing along with the tools they used to employ.

**FB:** Once the Biennale was a place where you went to

see the canon, but now the art world is totally different. You go to look for younger artists, new people.

**MG:** It's as though biennials were expected to serve the machinery of novelty and consumption. But that's an extremely limited view of what a biennial might be, and I never felt that this was what it is about. If you look at all the Venice Biennales in the '80s, and the whole history of the exhibition, it becomes clear that this idea that the Biennale today is about affirming a list of hot artists and young talent is really a phenomenon dating from the late '90s. So it's a short history. There used to be more diversity in the experience of what an exhibition can be and what an artwork is.

**FB:** But there is always a sense of discovery in an exhibition, as you say.

**MG:** Well, I hope. There are more than 110 (out of 160) artists who have never been in the Venice Biennale. But it's just not the 110 who are necessarily young and—

**FB:** How many dead people are there in the Biennale?

**MG:** Plenty. It's like the *Sixth Sense*. I see dead people.

**FB:** How many dead people?

**MG:** A lot. Forty? You know, if you ask me what the failure of this Biennale will be, it's that it might have come a little late.

**FB:** Late in what way?

**MG:** I'm continuing in this Biennale to do what I do and what I learned to do, but it's always the fate of the Venice Biennale that you're only asked to do it once the type of work you've been doing has become so mainstream that you do it and then you're done. *[laughter]*

**FB:** Are you announcing the end of your career?

**MG:** Maybe.

**FB:** Not yet. □