

» EXHIBITION

THE ENCYCLOPAEDIC PALACE

55th International Art Exhibition
Venice Biennale
Until 24 November
[Review by Roberta Marcaccio](#)

Right: Golden coins fall from the ceiling onto only women, in Vadim Zakharov's Russian pavilion

Below right: A 3.3m-tall model of Marino Auriti's 'Encyclopedic Palace' forms both the title and centrepiece of the exhibition

'The Encyclopaedic Palace', the title of the 55th Venice Art Biennale, pays homage to the homonymous project that self-taught Italian-American artist Marino Auriti proposed for the Washington Mall in 1955. The original 'palace' was an 3.3m-tall model of a 136-storey cylindrical skyscraper, intended to showcase the whole knowledge of the world, from the wheel to the space satellite. Auriti's model, now part of the collection of the American Folk Art Museum in Manhattan, forms the centrepiece of chief curator Massimiliano Gioni's exhibition.

The biennale brings together hundreds of personal cosmologies like those of Auriti, presenting artists compulsively looking at the world and trying to reproduce it. The focus of the show, says Gioni, is 'the very desire to know and see everything, at the point at which this impulse could be defined by obsession and paranoia. It is in a way an exhibition about the impossibility of knowing, the failure to achieve omniscience and the melancholy we suffer once it becomes clear that such efforts will always fall short of our desires.'

This condition characterises the current era of information-overload. Information is power, economy and control, and it mainly uses images to shape our experience of the world. As one grapples with an incessant proliferation of images, one risks losing the capability of assessing the world. Automatically it appears to be more necessary – but also more desperate – to structure information into a graspable system.

The exhibition confronts – but also layers and confuses – these 'external' images with those internal ones that we see 'with our eyes closed' – dreams, hallucinations, visions, fantasies. Gioni begins his historical exploration in the Giardini with a display of Carl Jung's Red Book (the illustrations that he made of his inner dreams), continuing in the Arsenale with Auriti's Palazzo Enciclopedico. With more than 4,500 objects – comprising contemporary artworks, historical artefacts, documents, relics, found objects – the exhibition presents itself as a temporary museum embracing a vast historical arc from the 20th century to today, including unknown artists, outsiders and amateurs.

The fluidity of the Arsenale has been broken into a series of chambers,

a very elegant progression of spaces that almost erases the medieval network of shipyards, making you forget where you are meandering, and creating an unedited sense of intimacy with each work.

The shaded gardens have always configured themselves as a sort of pop-up city that, following the tradition of 19th-century expos, brings the whole world into one place, an idea echoed also by Auriti's palace.

Gioni's biennale counts 88 participating countries, 10 making their first appearance: Angola, Bahamas, Bahrain, Ivory Coast, Kosovo, Kuwait, Maldives, Paraguay, Tuvalu and even the Vatican: names that tell a complicated geopolitical story. Germany and France have tried to deconstruct the nationalist model by swapping pavilions. Gilad Ratman, in the Israel pavilion, imagines a journey underground that starts in Israel and ends up in the pavilion in Venice. According to the artist it is by moving in hidden, underground networks, where national definitions do not count, that one can neutralise geopolitical borders.

This questioning of the 'nation state' is accompanied by recurrent critiques of globalised capitalism. The biennale is indeed obsessed with money. We see it in almost crass, even chauvinistic Vadim Zakharov's Russian Pavilion: a deluge of golden coins falls from the ceiling on to the lower hall where (only) female visitors can wander protected by an umbrella, while a suited man watches on from upstairs. We encounter money again in the Greek pavilion, where Stefanos



PHOTOGRAPHY: ITALO RONDINELLA, COURTESY LA BIENNALE DI VENEZIA

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Tsipopoulos' archive and film trilogy stage a vivid account of the economic crisis; money is also the protagonist of some of Jeremy Deller's narratives in the British pavilion.

One can't help but thinking of it also while visiting When Attitudes Become Form (a collateral event presented by the Fondazione Prada at Ca' Corner della Regina), the remaking of the show curated by Harald Szeemann at the Bern Kunsthalle in 1969, which marked a seminal moment

in curating contemporary art. The only thing that has changed since then is the vertiginous increase in the value of the works on display.

As the world of politics and economics makes pressure on art, and more in general on the cultural sector, to revitalise the market by providing ready-to-use solutions to restore growth and avert depression, the biennale clearly chos to 'engage with the financial crisis', as Gioni confirms while airing out the low production value of his exhibition. 'Most of the works on display', he continues, 'are just made of paper, pencil, and devotion.'

As one moves through this kaleidoscopic show, and as the barriers between the documentary and fiction blur, it becomes difficult to say whether it is the artists' imagination that is transforming the world outside, or the other way around.



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