

la Biennale di Venezia

49. ESPOSIZIONE INTERNAZIONALE
D'ARTE • PLATEA DELL'UMANITA' • PLATEAU
OF HUMANKIND • PLATEAU DER
MENSCHHEIT • PLATEAU DE L'HUMANITE
• PLATEA DELL'UMANITA' • PLATEAU OF
HUMANKIND • PLATEAU DER
MENSCHHEIT • PLATEAU DE
L'HUMANITE • PLATEA DELL'UMANITA' •
PLATEAU OF HUMANKIND • PLATEAU
DER MENSCHHEIT • PLATEAU
DE L'HUMANITE • PLATEA DELL'UMANITA'
• PLATEAU OF HUMANKIND • PLATEAU
DER MENSCHHEIT • PLATEAU DE L'HUMANITE
• PLATEA DELL'UMANITA' • PLATEAU OF
HUMANKIND • PLATEAU DER
MENSCHHEIT • PLATEAU DE
L'HUMANITE • PLATEA DELL'UMANITA' •

49. Esposizione Internazionale d'Arte
Venice - Giardini di Castello, Arsenale
June 10 - November 4 2001

Director
Harald Szeemann

Assistant to the Director
Cecilia Liveriero Lavelli

International Jury

Ery Càmara
Carolyn Christov-Bakargiev
Manray Hsu
Hans Ulrich Obrist
Virginia Pérez-Ratton

Leoni d'oro for lifetime achievement

Richard Serra
Cy Twombly

such a diversified offer of the "Plateau of Humankind": the course of human life, man and his behaviour, his relationship with his surrounding environment. It is logical that some overlapping is also present.

Birth control, along with the nuclear arms race, the air-pollution desired by U.S. presidents and the hunger crisis is one of today's biggest problems. *AVL (Atelier van Lieshout)* working together with the Dutch women's group "Women on Waves", exhibits a project in the form of a hospital ship for women from countries where abortion is outlawed to allow them to have abortions. The operation will take place in international waters, where abortion is not punishable. The shocking number of victims (175,000 per year) of mis-handled illegal abortions only serves to underline the urgency of the initiative.

Doctor *Michael Schmitz* conceived the project "Kinderbaum" (Children's Tree) with the aim of helping children. He is planning a world helicopter trip to find sponsors for a children's home with an occupational school in the country most afflicted with AIDS in the world, South Africa.

In both of these cases the instrument of help is presented: the hospital container and the helicopter.

The video work from *Tiong Ang* shows Indian school children. In silence, seated at their desks, they seem to dream with open eyes. Abruptly they are taken from their thinking, as the teacher enters the classroom and drives stupidly repetitive material into their heads. After she leaves silence rules, and the children are again in their inner worlds.

Endangerments to the health of children is shown in an endless loop by *Fiona Tan* with her two smoking "Javaanses Jongs" with the little brother forced into the role of passive

smoker. The artist uses "ethnographic" archive material in an arranged slapstick.

Georgina Starr conjures Halloween scenes. Small kids in police costumes march through the city, gun in hand, enter into the hall of a fashion show and shoot the models in a blood bath on the catwalk.

Realistic three-dimensionality for the age of the male sex. Between the "Baby" and the old man "Shaved Head" *Ron Mueck* shows the "Boy" as extremely large. In a squat, dressed in only a slip, he strikes each onlooker upon entry into the Corderia with a tender and penetrating questioning glance. Earlier, when men still possessed control, the Sphinx was feminine. Today given the explosion of female creativity and energy the Sphinx is masculine. The stigmata on the hands is not only held up for Christ and Saint Francis, but also for girls in puberty. Unheroically they bear their wounds, enduring the pain.

Heli Rekula places two feminine figures in a timeless contraction of the shattering of men's power craze in the metaphor of the capsized "American Star".

Priscilla Monge evokes the purity and streams of menstrual blood, covering a white room with snow-white sanitary napkins. And in white marble the truths of masculine genius are engraved, in the form of pieces from the "Tempest" by Shakespeare.

The bodily fluids of men and women are the starting point for the installation "Ciao Bella" by *Tracey Rose*.

A feminine being, both girl and young woman goes jogging, she stops before a closed bungalow style house, crosses the garden to the window, her gaze is full of curiosity, tenderness and expectancy. Through the slats of the blind one can see an expressionless youth,

jumping a lasso in the bourgeois interior. With a crack the lasso hits the floor. Tears appear in the girl's eyes. She draws back from the window and the camera pulls back to show the suburban landscape. The end of a tender drama expressing Strindbergian power. "Lasso", a silent film from *Salla Tykkä*.

Kept in the house by the bond with her son and husband, and driven by the desire to live a nomadic life, greater independence and disorder, *Eulalia Valldosera* makes everyday objects move and travel in a room.

In a strangely detached manner, a young woman, her head closely-cropped, hangs and shoots herself in desperation. But the stool returns under her feet, the bullet returns to the revolver, and she goes back to the table to read. A rewind-roulette between life and death by *Ene-Liis Semper*.

Mother, nourishment, life, death. The key words to define the people of reference, the necessities, the inevitable, which move relentlessly in the space of *Charles Sandison*.

The empress Elisabeth, Sissi from Austria, cared for her body; she was one of the first female body builders. Her wasp waist is legendary, just like her tragic life and fate. To know that she was always the most beautiful in the land, she created an album with the most beautiful women from other countries. Special ambassadors took care to provide her with their photos. *Francesco Vezzoli* also establishes such collections, the faces of beautiful people from films, theatre, fashion, society. On their pictures he intervenes with superimposed tears and eye make-up, as homage to Beauty, as a dream-like antidote for its transitory nature.

In small plaster boards *Eva Marisaldi* portrays all of the contacts, the transitoriness and the stur-

diness between two bodies. There are no faces to distract the viewer's attention in this still catalogue of nearness, metopes of modernity.

The healthy man does sports. After a decades long stasis of the image of the athlete—who still remembers the spear and discus throwers in the nimble declension of ancient images on the grass before the administrative buildings of sports organizations and ministries for culture and sport, or the museum for the Olympic games?—sport, as a metaphor for the race, for competition and for the cult of the body is once more of great topical interest in art. The topic of reference is no longer the construction of a tough body in overblown projections of sweaty muscle-bound bodies working out on fitness machines. Sport is used as a representation of pursuit of higher goals.

As a new variant of the "Unending Column", *Roderick Buchanan* puts forth the brutal and fine faces of Football and Rugby players during the singing of the national anthem, as they survey us horizontal and mute. Heavy cushions are used to represent the body weights of famous boxers in sculptural form.

Gustavo Artigas protests as a Mexican against the borderline, erected from waste material of the Gulf War between his country and the United States. He puts two sports together: Football (Mexico) and Basketball (USA). The two teams play simultaneously on the same combined field. In the work "Fusion", *Ingeborg Lüscher* depicts a football game between two teams in Trussardi suits, as a metaphor for the emotion of competition, sport and business. This fusion is caused by the jubilation and scrum of men after the goal.

Against the urban backdrop of a desolate eastern European city, *Josef Dabernig* shows the phlegmatic and calm, typically Austrian

scene of football team coaches experiencing the emotions of an invisible football game on benches similar to bus stop shelters, but recounted at high volume and in many languages. The great staged appearance of the two under the grandstand is in contrast, as are the parting handshakes with several functionaries. But even: there are no onlookers, the stands are empty, only the ritual, played out in its misery survives, despite the solemn exit through the passageway. "Wisla" is the parable of the emptiness inherent in the worldliness of sport.

Paul Pfeiffer compresses sports reporting into little scenes, which repeat endlessly, rising simultaneously to the level of static images and expanding the absurd and tragic effect of "figures at the base of a Crucifixion" through serial reproduction. In the exhibition, this artist is represented by the work "Self-portrait as a Fountain". *Lars Siltberg* binds spheres to the hands and feet of his well-made judo fighter, who then attempts to stand up and remain standing in water on a smooth icy surface against an air stream. He has so formed the Beauty of Failure, which as a dimension in art breaks into something wonderful. Courage, tenacity, strength and endurance. How difficult it is without life experiences to speak convincing words, to give them meaning and weight. *João Onofre* lets the young participants of the modelling course come before the camera alone and speak this simple sentence from Roberto Rossellini's "Stromboli" (1959): "Che io abbia la forza, la convinzione e il coraggio!". *John Pilson* leads us behind the scenes of today's office life. In a slapstick manner he explains the inefficiency of a law firm which should be efficient, recounting a deal lost as a result. These

images are contrasted with the moving scene of a singing child, drawing figures on the steamed up window in front of the opposing skyscraper.

Nedko Solakov also speaks of the profound meaning of the senselessness of human actions. For five months he let two painters, one after the other, paint over the work of the other. White cancels black, black cancels white. No one can say that at the Biennale there isn't enough painting: "A Life (Black and White)".

The rising costs of health care premiums, the explosion of hospital costs, the agreements of the chemical giants over the price of medicines. The newspapers are full such news. The affected are usually only used as examples: The sick, the invalid person.

Cancer threatens and destroys the lives of those living around the Chernobyl atomic power plant, hit by the nuclear disaster. *Viktor Maruščenko's* photographs show the normality of the threatened life in the area, the daily acceptance of the poisoning, and living with death. Maruščenko has shown this "stalker" area so effectively, that, although his reportage was commissioned, he was forced to disappear.

The Ukraine is a poor land, life is miserable. Switzerland on the other hand is one of the richest lands in the world, where it is tempting to turn away from misfortune and death. The retired vice-commander of police *Arnold Odermatt* has photographed accidents for years as an official duty, and from these—leaving aside the bloody toll—has made several images of considerable aesthetic impact.

Tatsumi Orimoto has for years cared for his mother, who suffers from Alzheimer's. So she has become the object of his art, she along with her friends who communicate with each

The perverse lucidity

Priscilla Monge has repeatedly explored from different angles the crevices in the uses of language and of social expressions, both in their meanings and in their symbolic references. Her work is about what is known but not said, or about what is done but not shown, bringing out in these reinterpreted meanings the most uncomfortable aspects of everyday life, fractioned between the intimate and the social, under apparently innocent formulations, within a poetics of contradiction. Through subtle details she generates a context of confusion, acting inside the psyche, in the mechanisms that cause sensitivity to convulse. Her narrative is experiential. The starting point may be a banal anecdote, but it ends up in a reflection that subverts and perverts the habits of innocent appearances, making use of the suspense of the unexpected, the surprise of grotesque or the acidity of black humour and irony as resources. The rendition is direct, flowing like a flash of lucidity and from there tending to produce a short-circuit in conventions, unsettles with new senses the understanding of reality, in an interpretative rewriting, like a vivid introspection, shared and critical. The lucidity of her gaze is somewhat perverse. It compels to a confrontation with the contexts, intensifying them, "normalising" the nightmares located in the intimacy of the unspeakable, insisting in vexation. Violence is always present in her work but never appears expressed with crudeness. It is something latent and in ambush, it develops in con-

several languages and the different degrees that articulate the intention of humiliating and annoying the other, the boomerangs are now fabricated in marble, converting the insult in an epitaph of a language of the most daily violence. The trilogy of videos *Lessons* (*Make-up lesson*, *How to (un)dress oneself* and *How to die of love*, 1998-2000) outlines even more this meaning of violence as a tautology of behaviour, as a cultural formula and strategy or as the masking of innocence.

Room for Isolation and Protection, the work presented at this edition of the Venice Biennale, seems to deepen in that reflection about the ways in which violence develops. On this occasion a subtle and complex violence is approached, one that arises from within, in a metaphorical context of self-aggression, as a conflict of the feminine. It is a square space, entirely lined with sanitary napkins. The piece has been conceived as an imitation of the upholstered quarters used in psychiatric institutions to protect the patients from hurting themselves by striking their bodies against the walls. Inside this enclosure, voices like vague whispers and unrecognisable muttered words inhabit the room as the deadened echo of an internal discourse. The space also refers to sound-proof rooms, meant to create the conditions of silence, and where that same silence makes audible the physiological sounds of the body, breath and vascular circulation. Metaphor of an (impossible) representation of silence, this work becomes a space to experience the void, in which the internal emerges.

The use of sanitary napkins as material or as tools

On the one hand the white colour isolates from interference in order to refer directly to the blood-red as its complementary, containing violence as a derivated symbol, "normalizing" the blood as an indicator of femininity, transforming the blood-red into a virtual content and stripping it of vindicating feminist connotations. The feminine as gender becomes an affirmation of a sensibility built from a bodily interior. That same affirmation confirms values expressed in the contradictions that cultural contexts represent to the feminine. Corporality and culture: the silenced word and the discourse, the body's voice and the rules of culture. On the other hand, the sanitary napkins establish a close formal analogy with the bricks in a wall of immaculate purity: protection and repression, isolation as muzzle, the inner voice as an echo of silence... The lightness of purity and the condensation of the obscure concentrate in the sanitary napkin. Contradictions of meanings, polar and complementary at the same time, generate associations that illuminate the symbolic levels of behaviours and discourses. The colour white and the neutral and aseptic texture of cotton place us in an extreme narrative minimalism and in an intense conceptual density.

This work condensates very clearly Priscilla Monge's working process, showing how the mingling of conceptual strategies with appropriating processes tend to generate a critical and reflexive context, of a visual character, linked to the experience of a daily life illuminated by symbolic and significant undertones.

Priscilla Monge 1968

texts of supposed tenderness, as in *Death sentences* (1993), texts and images embroidered on bare linen canvases as an innocent petit-point; or as in *Shut up and sing* (1997 IV Havana Biennial), in which wrestling helmets hold children's music boxes in their mouthpieces; or even more in the series of *Letters/Chains* (love letters, popular recipes to catch a man by bewitchment or a spell, and internet chains embroidered on crude linen, 1994-1998) in which the delirium of a language "fetishised" from the social hides the imposition of anxiety, fraud and deceit also conveyed as negative models of the feminine.

The series *Boomerangs* (1997-2001) place the verbal violence in a vicious circle of return: initially made out of wood and inscribed with insults in

is not new in her work. She has adopted different but always perturbing formulations. The *Football* (1997) was made by a manufacturer by hooking pieces of black leather to the sanitary napkins, reproducing the details of a real ball. Previously, in 1996, she had designed and made pants of different cuts and models, sewing sanitary napkins together. They were always exhibited as objects, but in 1997 in San José, Costa Rica, the artist presented a performance in which she walked the most crowded downtown streets wearing one of these pants, that progressively absorbed her own menstrual blood in the padded crotch.

The sanitary napkins used to build the space of *Room for Isolation and Protection* allow for the sliding of significance towards multiple readings.

In a way it is about free re-readings and reinterpretations of strategies and techniques; one could speak of a perverse pop hybridised with a conceptual minimalism.

Simplicity hides complexity, just the same as lucidity hides confusion or innocence hides perversity.

Santiago B. Olmo

Room
2001
Sanitary napkins,
installation, detail

