

## The 55<sup>th</sup> Biennale of Venice

### The Biennale of irony and poetry.

By **Jonathan Turner**

Photos exclusive to *Tableau Fine Arts Magazine, Amsterdam*, by **Renato Grome**

Actress Milla Jovovich is looking distraught. She is trapped in a glass-house in the garden of the Palazzo Malipiero Barnabo on the Grand Canal. She is frantically moving empty art-shipping boxes inside the confined space, occasionally talking on her mobile phone, like she is an international gallery owner. Also crammed into the see-through structure are framed works by Jeff Koons, Yoko Ono and Julian Schnabel, all stacked precariously below a crystal chandelier. The lamp swings dangerously every time she hits it with another thrown cardboard box. Milla is not looking happy, but this is merely an art performance about the horrors of freight by Tara Subkoff. Elsewhere in Venice, at the pavilion of Chile in the former Arsenale, Alfredo Jaar has built a massive bridge. On this structure sits a 5-by-5 metre pool filled with water. Every three minutes, accompanied by noisy hydraulics, a large-scale replica of the Biennale Giardini emerges from the water, then is quickly drowned again, showing sinking models of the 28 national pavilions built in the gardens over the past century. These two theatrical, self-referential, conceptual events provide a thesaurus of intriguing art-world metaphors. Welcome to the 55<sup>th</sup> Venice Biennale.

The Venice Biennale is an event which has always functioned simultaneously on two levels. It is viewed as a cohesive summary of the past two years of the best contemporary art from around the globe but also as a dramatic platform for predicting future trends. It is both a frontier-crossing mega-exhibition and a way for individual countries to promote their national priorities. This makes the Venice Biennale unique and exciting. Of the 88 countries participating in national pavilions in this edition, ten are making their very first appearance: Angola (awarded The Golden Lion for best national pavilion), Bahamas, Bahrain, Ivory Coast, Kosovo, Kuwait, Maldives, Paraguay, Tuvalu and the Vatican. The central exhibition curated by Massimiliano Gioni, entitled *Il Palazzo Enciclopedico (The Encyclopedic Palace)*, features 150 artists from 38 countries. Plus 47 collateral events take place in numerous locations around the city and neighbouring islands, including important solo shows by such big names as Pedro Cabrita Reis, Anthony Caro, Roy Lichtenstein, Edvard Munch, Robert Motherwell, Marc Quinn, Rudolf Stingel, Antoni Tàpies, Ai Wei Wei and Lawrence Weiner. As an avalanche of international art, the Venice Biennale cannot be matched.

Since the Second World War, the Venice Biennale has introduced Expressionism, then Pop Art, then cool Conceptual Art to the broader world. More recently, it launched such cutting edge movements as graffiti art, the NBA (New British Artists) and the Chinese wave. This year, revealing a mood relatively free of bombastic statement and spectacle, the 55<sup>th</sup> Venice Biennale is characterized by a growing sense of poetics and calm reflection. Across the board, artists exhibit works which are the result of careful study, intense focus and refined manual labour. If this sounds boring, it is not. The pavilions by Berlinde De Bruyckere (Belgium), Mark Manders (Netherlands), Richard Mosse (Ireland) and Sarah Sze (USA) easily prove this. Aesthetics and passion seem to be winning.

Many observers have decided that maybe the current recession has led to a return to fundamental values. In a historical sense, we see a desire for the “happy” 1970s, when the world was art’s oyster, and social change was desirable. What was once social questioning can now look like privileged posturing, so socio-political themes are treated with a veneer of stream-lined aesthetics. In sharp videos and documentary objects, those social issues particularly aligned to the quotidian reality of disparaging wealth were tackled by Jesper Just (Danish pavilion) and in the pavilions of Catalonia, Greece and Japan.

Argentina even faces up to its own social demons with a multi-channelled video installation by Nicola Costantino dedicated to Eva Peron, convincingly played by a smartly-dressed actress in a series of domestic scenes. We see her as a woman of myth, tragedy and glory. But just to be sure we don’t get too sentimental, a hidden room contains a tub of frozen tears and a mechanical female robot trapped in a cage.

Many other artists focus on issues unique to their nations. In the British pavilion, Jeremy Deller has created an installation slamming mass tourism, police brutality and the monarchy. In paintings, prison drawings and videos, he gives his sarcastic rendering of the dangers of cultural imperialism as represented by such British symbols as a huge falcon grabbing a Range Rover, and a sad-looking Ziggy Stardust. Zsolt Asztalos in the Hungarian pavilion packs a stronger punch with his video installation “Fired but unexploded”. Films of hovering, life-sized bombs and mortar shells create a catalogue of dud weapons produced over many decades in France, USSR, Germany, Czechoslovakia, Italy and Hungary. They are still being discovered in various fields and villages as souvenirs from some countries that no longer even exist. This creates live-coverage of “dead”, but dangerous objects, accompanied by a sound-track of church-bells, laughter and the noises of daily life. The Kuwait pavilion in Palazzo Michiel del Brusa takes a more poignant stance. Sami Mohammad uses models and fragments of monumental sculpture to comment on the problems associated with making figurative statues in the Middle East, while Tarek Al-Ghoussein takes photographs tracking key-sites within the recent history of Kuwait’s urban development. The artist stands as a tiny figure in empty stadiums and the halls of immense buildings, places otherwise devoid of human presence, as the sole figure in an abandoned world.

The German pavilion is dominated by *Bang*, a large-scale, sprawling installation by Ai Wei Wei made from 886 three-legged, traditional Chinese wooden stools. The visitor is dwarfed by the interlocking web, where each antique stool becomes a building block in a structure that symbolizes the changing domestic life in China’s mega-cities. The work of Ai Wei Wei is also shown in two other separate exhibitions in Venice, including *Straight*, a massive installation of reinforced steel bars recovered from the rubble of schools demolished by the earthquakes in Sichuan in 2008. The French pavilion, meanwhile, hosts a three-part musical performance filmed by Anri Sala, exploring the interpretation of the same 1930 concerto composed by Maurice Ravel, but as played by two different pianists, then remixed by a deejay.

The investigation of the concepts of national representation in national pavilions is a recurring theme at the Venice Biennale, so following the suggestion of the Foreign Affairs departments of France and Germany, both countries decided to exchange their pavilions this year. Representing France in the former German pavilion, inside which the music itself was recorded, Sala was interested in the additional resonance and historical validity this would give to his work. Elsewhere

at the Biennale, the remarkable *When Attitudes Become Form* at the Ca' Corner della Regina faithfully reproduces a ground-breaking show staged in 1969 in Bern. As a project, it carefully grafts the former exhibition space from Switzerland, complete with all the works by post-Minimalist masters, inside a canal-side Venetian palace.

The Romanian pavilion takes a different stance on history by providing a retrospective of the Biennale itself. In what is certainly the most immaterial pavilion in the 55<sup>th</sup> edition, a changing team of 5 dancers lays in simple poses on the floor, or stands in straight lines like dashes in Morse code. The dancers re-enact artworks, repeat protest speeches and make anti-clerical statements. While mingling with the viewers, one actor voices such truisms as “Good morality is good medicine.” Created by performance artist Alexandra Pirici and choreographer Manuel Pelmus, the work appeals to the public’s selective memory. According to the artists: “The retrospective can be seen as an ephemeral monument to the biennale, a critique of its Euro-centrism, a vain display of power, luxury or mere conservatism. But it is also a celebration of its openness for experimentation, for the coexistence of virtually all the trends, media and genres that art uses or represents.” In any case, for many visitors, this work was more successfully staged than the performance-piece by British-born Tino Sehgal. Sehgal won the Golden Lion as best artist for his contribution of a small group of people who hum and make beatbox noises while moving on the floor, as part of central *The Encyclopedic Palace* exhibition.

This year, some artists have reshaped their country’s pavilions altogether. In an example of reverse archaeology, Lara Almarcegui has created neat piles of rubble, sand, bricks and broken glass as a way of documenting the Spanish pavilion itself, destroying sections then reconstructing the walls as a way to document the building process. Artist Kimsooja creates a game of mirrors in the Korean pavilion, and challenges the concepts of normal architectural space. The visitor feels as though he is inside a kaleidoscope, with streams of coloured light reflected into infinity. Floors and ceilings become indistinct. The concept of architecture is further explored by the Bouillon Group for their *Kamikaze Loggia* which functions this year as the Georgia Pavilion. It is a modular wooden structure “piggy-backing” on top of an existing building in the Arsenale, reached via a winding staircase. Typical to the way people expand their living quarters in Tbilisi, the Georgian capital, this is an example of informal, provisional architecture.

In some ways, it is similar to a panoramic installation nearby in the Arsenale by Erik van Lieshout. The Dutch artist has parked a Lancia and a Citroen sedan, opened up a couple of picnic umbrellas, installed a screen, then built a wooden ramp to create an out-door drive-in on the edge of the Venetian quay. The irony of constructing a drive-in theatre in a water-logged city is not lost. Meanwhile, as part of Massimiliano Gioni’s central exhibition, Danh Ho has imported a colonial-era wooden Catholic church from her native Vietnam. Carved in local style, its appearance in Venice is a clear case of reverse imperialism: as if Italy needs another Catholic church.

*The Encyclopaedic Palace* draws inspiration from an imaginary 136-story museum, designed in 1955 to house all of the world’s knowledge and discoveries, from the wheel to the satellite. This utopian dream by Marino Auriti is the starting point for Gioni’s exhibition, which also includes the visions outlined in Carl Gustav Jung’s *Red Book*, and ends with the geometric purity of Walter De Maria’s vast *Apollo’s Ecstasy*, an installation of bronze bars from the collection Stedelijk Museum.

“Blurring the line between professional artists and amateurs, outsiders and insiders, the exhibition takes an anthropological approach to the study of images, focusing in particular on the realms of the imaginary and the functions of the imagination. What room is left for internal images – for dreams, hallucinations and visions – in an era besieged by external ones?” asks Gioni.

So we have a plethora of archivists and collectors, doodlers in notebooks and photographers who obsessively focus on a single subject. Some works stand out. Young American painter Ellen Altfest produces small images which combine pathos with the clinical eye. She focuses on hairs, blemishes and skin pores, and the resulting portraits display a microscopic, nearly manic degree of detail. At the other edge of the spectrum, Austria’s Maria Lassnig (born 1919), continues to paint expressive self-portraits as neon-hued outlines against pale backgrounds. Drastic, unnerving, restless and unflattering, Lassnig’s images earned her a Golden Lion for Lifetime Achievement at the 2013 Biennale. Using sparse, lurid line-work, the only other place that this powerful manner of painting can be seen at the Biennale this year is at the Punta Della Dogana. Here, in a show of recent acquisitions by the Pinault Collection, we find a room of seven disparate paintings with macabre overtones by Marlene Dumas. School girls with skull-like features, a nun in black with her face painted a deathly shade, a pale crucifix – here is a contemporary female interpretation of Death in Venice.

Viviane Sassen (born Amsterdam, 1972) is represented by a dream-like series of photos, in which figures emerge from deep shadows, holding others aloft. Set in dusty African townships, draped hands and limp-limbed poses lead to an other-worldly mood of sleep-deprivation and death. There is a section curated by Cindy Sherman in which the hyper-realist sculptures by John de Andrea, Duane Hanson and Charles Ray, stand next to Paul McCarthy’s *Children’s Anatomical Education Figure* (1990) with drooping entrails, and Jimmie Durham’s folkloric version of Jesus. This disjointed sense of realism creates real friction, as does the erotic power of a series of small portraits by Pierre Mollinier, Hans Bellmer, Carol Rama and Karl Schenker.

Outside the central exhibition, many artists responded to the concept of the encyclopaedia by creating art works using paper, books or which reflected the potency of stored information. In the Brazilian pavilion, Odires Mlaszho’s collages and sculptures are made from text books and law manuals, almost as though such volumes have a fetishist value. Using Afrikaans/English dictionaries glued together in blocks, South Africa’s Wim Botha then carves realistic busts as though he is using wood. A highlight of the Italian pavilion is a laboratory-like space devoted to Marco Tirelli. Its walls are lined with drawings and sculptural forms, as though each sheet of paper is a stage-set for scientific instruments, miniature metal structures and amorphous glass objects.

In Venice, encyclopaedic information is cleverly garbled in a series of video works, all with a degree of irony and humour. At *Who is Alice?* a show of 15 Korean artists at Spazio Lightbox, Beom Kim splices together footage of newsreaders recorded on different days. In this way, he forces them to speak in poetry, talk about personal feelings, or simply relay silly instructions to the viewer. At *The Starry Messenger* by Welsh artist Bedwyr Williams, the viewer is bombarded with an entirely new manner of imagery. Loud, manic and insane, the video proceeds at a hectic rate, accompanied by jazz music and fairy tales. Williams’ video aligns mosaics to dentistry, computer graphics to ugly shoes, pizza to a Cherokee attorney. It is all so fast that the combined inundation of frantic imagery and noise ends up making partial sense. At the Latin American pavilion, the Quintapata Collective

from the Dominican Republic created a video underlining the protocol for chewing gum (“Never mix gum and tequila, no chewing gum if you are giving a presidential speech”), and provided free gum to the viewer, with the request that you then stick it on to the video screen. And German artist Hito Steyerl has create the perfect antidote to such a mega-event as the 55<sup>th</sup> Venice Biennale. His new video *How Not To Be Seen* is a tongue-in-cheek documentary. It is a manual giving guerrilla advice about how to be escape from hyper-visibility in this era of digital surveillance. Amusingly, many of Steyerl’s methods utilise cheap computerized camouflage.

Maybe one of the most unusual projects at the current Venice Biennale can be found at *Rhizoma (generation in waiting)*, an exhibition focusing on emerging art from Saudi Arabia at the Magazzini del Sale. *Takki* is a cult internet series which explores the lives of young people in Saudi’s most cosmopolitan city, Jeddah. It boasts one of the Gulf’s largest youth audiences, with 1 million hits per episode. Mohammad Makki producer and director of *Takki*, was commissioned by the exhibition to introduce a new character into the series, real-life artist Eyad Magmazil, who in Episode 10 discusses the upcoming *Rhizoma* exhibition at the 55<sup>th</sup> Venice Biennale. The plot also incorporates the fictional character of Bader, a graffiti artist. As the story develops, Eyad travels to Venice, and Episode 13 was being filmed throughout the Biennale opening days, with actors, artists and the crew attending various events. Forever blurring the lines between fact and fiction, in Venice, art continues to imitate life.

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## CAPTIONS

### ***The Biennale of irony and poetry***

55<sup>th</sup> Venice Biennale, by **Jonathan Turner**

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Curator, art critic and long-term Tableau correspondent Jonathan Turner visits the 55<sup>th</sup> Venice Biennale, and reviews how the international world of contemporary art can still react in direct response to specific national issues. This includes the theme of financial strife (videos based on poverty and cash by Stefanos Tsivapoulos at the Greek pavilion), didactic installations about tea-ceremonies and commuter-overcrowding (Koki Tanaka at the Japanese pavilion), documentaries focusing on unemployment and exemplary human behaviour during a time of social uncertainty at the Catalanian pavilion, and quirky artworks based on rising sea-levels and climate change at the pavilion of the Maldives. “Choose between architecture and marine life”, proclaims one slogan at “Portable Nation”, the show from The Maldives at the Gervasuti Foundation reinterpreting today’s romantic attitudes towards environmentalism. “Save the city or preserves the lagoon – a difficult choice for Venetians.” Welcome to the ironic new world order.

Text: Jonathan Turner

Exclusive photography by Renato Grome.

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*The Sandringham Estate, Norfolk*, a wall-painting featuring a giant falcon grabbing a regal Range Rover in its claws by Jeremy Deller, who targeted such themes as monarchy, the class system, English rock music and the dangers of cultural imperialism at the British pavilion.

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A performance and installation by Tara Subkoff, starring actress Milla Jovovich trapped in a glass-house filled with art-moving paraphernalia, built in the garden of Palazzo Malipiero Barnabo' on the Grand Canal.

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Sarah Sze (born 1969 in Boston), *Triple Point* in the American pavilion. Constructing an intricate explosion of materials, Sze has created a sort of universal globe, composed from a myriad of tiny objects, lamps, string, stones and domestic items stacked on top of each other, tied together and stretched out into almost cosmic proportions. The pavilion becomes an amphitheatre of detailed intimacy, and a cabinet of curiosities, rich with metaphors of passing time (swinging pendulums, sand-timers).

Berlinde De Bruyckere, (born 1964 in Ghent), *Kreupelhout* in the Belgian pavilion. A synthesis of the artist's recurring themes of life/death, strength/vulnerability, oppression/protection, an enormous uprooted elm tree with a mass of gnarled and knotted trunks and limbs with a disturbing resemblance to the muscles, bones and tendons of the human body. Rags and bandages are tied to the form, in a work partly inspired by the iconography of Saint Sebastian, the protector saint of Venice.

Mark Manders (born 1968 in Volkel), *Room with Broken Sentence* in the Dutch pavilion. A multi-faceted installation of poetic tension, both fragile and dangerous. Terracotta heads, ceramic utensils, wooden furniture, frames and raw materials balanced in precarious equilibrium, with the windows lined with fake tabloids and non-sensical newsprint. As a sublime ode to anti-beauty, one wall of opaque plastic conceals into a semi-hidden "throne-room", which contains a toilet, a chair and the items used to construct the installation.

Richard Mosse (born 1980 in Kilkenny) *The Enclave* in the Irish pavilion at the Fondaco Marcello. A major highlight at the 55<sup>th</sup> Venice Biennale, Mosse has re-invented war journalism in his riveting, emotional five screen installation documenting the brutal and complex civil war in the eastern Democratic Republic of Congo. Using a hand-held steady-cam and infra-red film, his saturated imagery of soldiers, refugees and the landscapes of fear, is bathed in friendly pink, the toxic colour adding a psychedelic aspect to scenes of village life, funerals, slain rebels and distorted camouflage. The sound-scape is a haunting mixture of song, rushing water and distant gun-fire (by composer Ben Frost). Amazing, defiant, tragic and disorientating, Mosse transgresses the traditional conventions of war photography. As Mosse states, he explores the limits of art's ability "to represent narratives so painful that they exist beyond language." Unmissable.

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Reflecting into infinity, the mirrored Korean pavilion by Kim Sooja (born 1957 in Taegu, lives in New York). The Spanish pavilion turned into a building site and a temple of urban decay by Lara Almarcegui (born 1972 in Saragossa, lives in Rotterdam). The *Kamikaze Loggia*, the temporary pavilion of Georgia, built as an illegal attic on top of an existing structure at the Arsenale by the Boullion Group. *A Remote Whisper* by Portuguese artist Pedro Cabria Reis (born 1956 in Lisbon) a precarious architectural intervention creating a labyrinth made from fluorescent lights, aluminium bars and electrical wiring at the Palazzo Falier on the Grand Canal. From Romania, dancers re-enacting the art history of the Venice Biennale through performances at the Romanian pavilion, devised by artist Alexandra Pirici (1982) and choreographer Manuel Pelmus (1974); and making the visually unwanted into a feature – fake plumbing pipes in the corner of the exhibition space at the Nuova Galleria at the Romanian Institute, by Sebastian Moldovan. “Through its ambiguous identity, it makes the space look improvised and unfinished,” says Moldovan of his *Sanitary Installation*. “As an artistic work, it puts on stage this object that we otherwise try so hard to conceal.”

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*Ego*, 2013, a surreal video-installation on the edge of the quay at the Arsenale, combining a drive-in movie-theatre, a holiday resort and an entertainment stadium by Erik van Lieshout (born 1968 in Deurne, lives in Rotterdam).

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Installation by Italian-born Rudolf Stingel at the Palazzo Grassi. In one of the 55<sup>th</sup> Biennale’s greatest ironies, Stingel’s solo show unwittingly resembled the lavish but more traditional *Carpet Interior* by Farid Rasulov, who entirely covered the walls and furniture of the nearby Azerbaijan pavilion with oriental rugs.

*Daylight Flotsam*, an installation made from a maze of fluorescent bulbs and plastic bottles by Bill Culbert at the New Zealand pavilion in the church of Santa Maria della Pieta’.

Contemporary artists Oliver Croy and Oliver Elser repropoed a vast collection of detailed model houses handmade by Austrian insurance clerk Peter Fritz (1916-1992), welcoming the visitor to the central exhibition *The Encyclopedic Palace*, curated by Massimiliano Gioni

The playful yet vaguely sinister Serbian pavilion features assemblages made from plastic toys, wooden tools and razor blades, *3D Wallpaper for Children’s Room* by Vladimir Peric (born 1962 in Belgrade).

In one of many installations at the 55<sup>th</sup> Venice Biennale which incorporated books and printed matter as an essential part their theme, *Dancing The Wild Seas* by Sri Astari (born 1953) at the Indonesian pavilion at the Arsenale.

Marco Tirelli (born 1954 in Rome), created a laboratory of pseudo-scientific imagery from paper, bronze, wood and plaster, at the Italian pavilion.

*Bang* by Chinese dissident artist Ai Wei Wei (born 1957 in Beijing) at the German pavilion, 886 antique wooden stools balanced in spectacular equilibrium.

Elisabetta Benassi (born 1966 in Rome), *The Dry Savages*, 10,000 imprinted bricks laid into the floor at the Italian pavilion.

*Campo de color*, an perfumed installation of spices and coloured pigments by Sonia Falcone from Bolivia, in the Latin American pavilion at the Arsenale.

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Two fundamental works opening and closing the central exhibition by New York-based Italian curator Massimiliano Gioni at the Arsenale: a model of *The Encyclopedic Palace of the World*, 1950, by Marino Auriti (1891-1980) and *Apollo's Ecstasy*, 1990 by Walter De Maria, a minimalist bronze installation from the collection of the Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam.

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The human condition as seen by women artists. Maria Lassnig (born 1919, Vienna, awarded the Golden Lion for her career at the 55<sup>th</sup> Venice Biennale), *Du Oder Ich*, 2005, oil on canvas at The Encyclopedic Palace. Ellen Altfest (born 1970, New York), *The Hand*, 2011, oil on canvas. A portrait by Amsterdam-based artist Marlene Dumas at the show of works from the exhibition *Prima Materia*, works from the collection of Francois Pinault at the Punta della Dogana. American artist Cindy Sherman has curated a striking collection of figurative art as part of the Biennale's central exhibition, including Jimmy Durham's expressionistic *Jesus. Es geht un die Wurst*, 1992; Paul McCarthy's soft *Children's Anatomical Educational Figure*, 1990 and John De Andrea's painted bronze statue of *Ariel II*, 2011. New discoveries for many at the 55<sup>th</sup> Biennale: a dream-like photograph by Viviane Sassen (born 1972, Amsterdam) and erotic watercolours by Carol Rama (born 1918, Turin), both part of the central exhibition.

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Using hard-cover legal text books as elements in sculptural collages, *International Law Directory* from the series *Altered books* by Sao Paulo artist Odires Mlaszho, at the Brazilian pavilion. The faithful reconstruction of the historic, post-Minimalist exhibition "*When Attitudes Become Form*" from Bern in 1969, at the Prada Foundation at the Ca' Corner della Regina on the Grand Canal, including works by Gary B. Kuehn, Eva Hesse, Alan Saret, Reiner Ruthenbeck and Richard Tuttle. *Generic Self-Portrait as an Exile* by Wim Botha at the South African pavilion, carved from a stack of English/Afrikaans dictionaries. *Who is Alice?* a show of contemporary works from Korea at Spazio Lightbox, including *The Wing*, a painted resin sculpture by Xooang Choi, an ink portrait by Jung-Wook Kim, and *Cosmetic Girls*, a series of photographs on the theme of hidden identity by Hein-Kuhn Oh.

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*Danae* by Vadim Zakharov (born 1859 in Dushanbe) in the Russian pavilion. "Ladies, you are about to enter into a danger zone at your own risk", announced a uniformed guide who handed out umbrellas. Zakharov turned the whole pavilion into a conceptual conveyor belt, with gold coins raining from the ceiling, stacks of money-bags and handsome assistants dressed as oligarchs contemplating signs dedicated to "greed, cynicism, robbery, speculation, wilfulness, gluttony, seduction, envy and stupidity."