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Two senses of representation: 49th Venice Biennale

Platea dell’Umanita; Plateau of Humankind, Plateau d’Humanite, Plateau der Menschheit (2001) curated by Harold Szeemann

Katy Deepwell

Part 1: Some statistics

In 2001, Harold Szeemann’s Plateau of Humankind included: 63 nations with 113 groups/teams which included 130 individual artists of which 27 women artists were included. In 2001, women artists were 23.8% (of 113 teams/artists): 20.7% (of the 130 individual artists) included.

The percentage of women in such international shows although it is widely perceived as generally rising across the twentieth century from less than 10% to more consistently levels of 20% is not any simple measure of progress or finally the acknowledgement and international recognition due to women artists. The figures at international shows like the Venice Biennale vary quite dramatically and go up and down. Surveys of Venice Biennales 1978-1986 showed women’s participation as moving from 10% (1978); to 13.6% (1980), to 20.4% (1982), but down to 10.3% (1984), and 9.7% (1986) (figures from Pauline Barrie "The Art Machine Part 2" Women Artists Slide Library Journal (London) Feb/March 1988 no. 21 pp.16-17. Figures researched by Fre Meijer, Nicole Roeperts, Sya Stam & Annet Zondervam for SVBK). n.paradoxa (print edition, volume 4) surveyed the number of women in the last Venice Biennale in 1999 where Harold Szeemann’s D’APERTutto showed the work of 103 artists, 25 of which were women (24%). In the 1999 national pavilions, there were 98 projects/artists: 25 of which were by women artists or joint projects in which women artists participated (25%).

Some countries have shown the first woman artist ever in their pavilion in the early 1990s, while others have maintained their record of never showing any work by women. Some national pavilions have chosen to alternate between the sexes in their...
strategy of showing a single artist each year or maintained a well-calculated gender balance in the groups of artists they have chosen to show every two years. Several countries showed for the first time in 2001, New Zealand and Hong Kong, for example.

The question remains: why has the percentage of women artists dropped in 2001, especially in an exhibition which lays claim to bring together a platform for humanity? Did Szeemann’s selection of themes for "humankind" reproduce a male-centred account of the issues facing "humanity", even as it chose to focus on artist's perceptions of the representation of humankind? Below are the names of artists, Part 2 goes on consider these last two questions in relation to what did this exhibition represent?

**Women Artists in 2001:** Chantal Akerman, Vanessa Beecroft, Tania Brughera, Rineke Dijkstra, Regina Galindo, Cristina Rodero Garcia, Laura Horelli, Ilya and Emilia Kabakov, Susan Kleinberg, Christiane Lohr, Eva Marisaldi, Marisa Merz, Chantal Michel, Priscilla Monge, Tanja Ostojic, Alexandra Ranner, Heli Rekula, Tracey Rose, Ene-Liis Semper, Georgina Starr, Fiona Tan, Alessandra Tesi, Salla Tykka, Eulalia Validossora, Minnette Vari, Maaria Wirkkala

**All Artists included in 2001 were:-**
Plateau of Thought - Erich Bödeker, Seni Camara, Ousmane Ndiaye Dago, Gilberto De La Nuez, John Goba, Ettore Jelmorini, Cheff Mwai, Jean Baptiste Ngnetchopa, August Rodin, Hans Schmidt, Peter Wanjau.

Special Projects: Poetry Bunker - Marco Nero Rotelli; Homage to Chen Zhen; Refreshing: Massimo Bartolini, Cai Guoqiang, Olafur Eliason, Tobias Rehberger, Rikrit Tiravanija; Human Condition - Anur; Museum in Progress - Ken Lum; Heli Global Art Tour - Michael Schmitz; Secession Vienna - Matthias Herrmann; Homage to Alighiero Boetti.

The 49 pavilions and national projects included 144 groups, teams, or individual artists of which were 29 women artists: (20%).
Lawrence D "Butch" Morris, Ahmet Oktem, xurban.net, Sermin Sherif, Murat Morova; 
Ukraine: Panorama; USA: Robert Gober; Uruguay: Rimer Cardillo; Venezuela: Victor Hugo Irazabal.

**Cultural institutions:** Bolivia: Ugalde Gaston; Chrystal Ostermann Stumpf, Hortensia Montenegro, Ricardo Perez Alcala; Columbia: Nadin Ospina; Costa Rica: Villacruz, Rafa Fernandez; Cuba: Ibrahim Miranda Ramos, Luis Gomez Armeteros; Dominican Republic: Dionisio Blanco, Antonio Guadalupe, Mariano Sanchez; Ecuador: Jose Antonio Cauja, Roberto Noboa; El Salvador: Vladimir Montufar; Rene Chacon; Guatemala: Juan Francisco Yoc Cotzajay; Doris Contreras; Haiti: Mario Benhamin, Guerdy Preval; Honduras: Regina Aguilar; Nicaragua: Hugo Palma Ibarra; Panama: Alessandra Rosas Fuentes, Aristides Urena Ramos; Paraguay: Lucy Yegros "Arete", Christian Ceuppens, Adrian Gonzalez Brun; Peru: Roberto Huracaya.

China - Hong Kong: Ellen Pau, Siu-Kee Ho, Chi-Wo Leung.

Taipei: Shu-min Lin, Shih-fen Liu, Michael Ming-hong Li, Chien-chi Chang, Wenchih Wang.

Additional Special Exhibitions at Venice, part of the official program

**Allora Dunque** - Lothar Baumgarten, Willem Boshoff

**Authentic/Excentric** - Maria Magdalena Campos-Pons, Godfried Donkor, Berni Searle, Zineb Sedir, Yinka Shonibare, Rachid Koraichi

**Hollywood** - Marizio Cattalan

**IASPIS project:** Michael Elmgreen and Ingar Dragset, Jeppe Hein, Annika Larsson, Anne Olofsson

**La Trahison des images:** Nordproject & Co. & Ann Veronica Janssens, Marcel Berlanger, Francois Curlet, Michael Dans, Edith Dekyndt, Eric Duyckaerts, Patrick Everaert, Michel Francois, Jean-Marie Gheerardijn, Patrick Guns, Johan Muyle, Benoit Plateus, Benoit Roussel, Jacques Lizene.

**The Deliverance and the Patience** - Mike Nelson

**Terraferma** - Gabriele Basilico, Felix Gonzalez-Torres, Gabriel Orozco, Louise Bourgeois.
Awards at Venice were given to
Richard Serra, Gregor Schneider (Pavilion prize), Anri Sala, Janet Cardiff & George Bures Miller, Pierre Huyghe, Marisa Merz, John Pilson, A1-53167.
Special Mention to Fiona Tan and Yinka Shonibare.
Lifetime Award to Juan Downey.

Part 2
‘The Plateau of Humankind is not a theme as such but rather a declaration of responsibility - to history, to the events of the present day. It opens up a dimension...." Artists look at the world and address the world, searchig out and recounting all the multiple dimensions of contemporary humanity.’ (2001, Venice Biennale official press release)

‘In the reaction of artists now one can see a clear difference to that of ten years ago: there is no longer the intense affirmation of one's own identity, but rather an appeal to what is eternal within humankind - an appeal that is only valid if it draws on what is local and "rooted". (Harold Szeemann, 2001 Venice Biennale official press statement)

‘people still expect me to think up a common denominator..That's not the case, nor does the exhibition illustrate a particular sort of "plateau of humankind".That's why I brought up Edward Steichen's Family of Man by way of comparison. That tremendous optimism after the Second World War, whereby he presented all these different portraits as one big family, is no longer the issue today. Today's artists are much more interested in the physiognomy and behaviour of people. In addition, the focus is not so much on the individual as on the outside world’

(Harold Szeemann interview with Jan Winkelmann Metropolis M (Holland), Second edition, Summer 2001 p.24)

Why has the percentage of women artists dropped in 2001, especially in an exhibition which lays claim to bring together a platform for humanity? Did Szeemann's selection of themes for "humankind" reproduce a male-centred account of the issues facing "humanity"? What did this exhibition represent as a current view of human concerns and what it means to be human? Were women artists marginalised because of a false idea that they cannot produce knowledge about what it means to be fully human, only ideas about femininity and womanhood?