

Art in America

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Possibly the most surprising show in Venice is Thomas Demand's, on the island of San Giorgio, since it inverts our expectations of his usual practice of research and model-building.

free-associative questions (*La Beauté est convulsive. Pourquoi faire?*) in a large blank book. Set up in a chapel-like space with a surveillance camera projecting the book and the moving hand high on the center wall, the work has the effect of turning visitors into scribes, if not prophets, who record the articles of an unspecified faith.

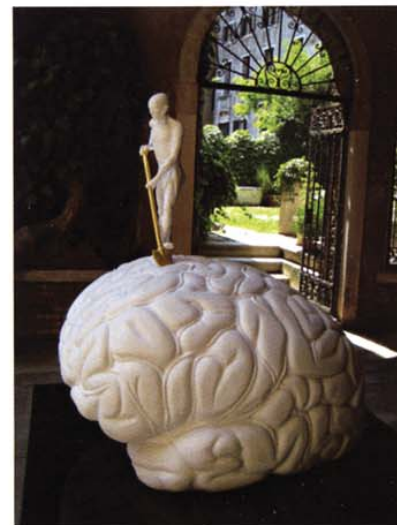
As if a homogenizing, pan-Africa approach were not enough to set off some critics, the works in "Luanda Pop" all belong to Sindika Dokolo, a businessman from the Congo who is now based in Luanda. In the exhibition handout, Dokolo specifies that his is an African collection, not a collection of African art (hence Warhol?), and that he intends it to be the basis for a projected Center for Contemporary Art in Luanda. That plan is endorsed in an accompanying statement by the president of the Republic of Angola (who happens to be Dokolo's father-in-law). At the very least, accepting

the exhibition can be seen as inadvertently placing the Biennale in the service of Angola's business and government elite. It's hard to imagine the title of official "national" representation being similarly granted today to a European or U.S. private collection.

Beyond the Arsenale, the national pavilions are spread far and wide. Portugal is installed in the early 17th-century Fondaco Marcello, a low warehouse structure that opens to the Grand Canal and perfectly suits Angela Ferreira's "Maison Tropicale." Ferreira excavates the story of the three prefab house prototypes designed by Jean Prouvé and sent to French colonial Africa in the mid 20th century. The prototypes were forgotten for decades, until the designer's star rose again. Purchased by a Paris dealer, the houses were dismantled and returned to France for restoration. (One was displayed in Paris and New York last spring before heading to Christie's, where it fetched nearly \$5 million.)

As if to propose a structure that is both crate and cargo, Ferreira has made an elongated, shipping container-shaped abstraction of a *Maison Tropicale* in lumber, aluminum and steel. The construction is accompanied by her photographs of the now empty lots in Niamey and Brazzaville where the houses stood for decades. We are left to question whether the three modernist relics have been "repatriated" to their culture of origin, or if Africa has once again been robbed of a part of its own heritage.

Another kind of meditation on heritage is undertaken by Guillermo Kuitca, who is representing Argentina with a suite of four Pollock-size paintings that selectively



Jan Fabre: Marble Thinking Model/Study 1, 2007, white marble, 54 1/4 by 37 1/4 by 47 1/4 inches; at Palazzo Benzon. Photo Marcia E. Vetrocq.



Thomas Demand: Grotto, 2006, C-print mounted on Diasec, approx. 6 1/2 by 14 1/2 feet; at Fondazione Giorgio Cini. Photo courtesy Fondazione Prada. © VG Bild-Kunst, Bonne/SIAE, Roma.

Anish Kapoor: S-curve, 2006, polished steel, approx. 30 feet long; in "Artempo" at Palazzo Fortuny.



encapsulate the legacy of Cubism. Installed near the Fenice in a 17th-century meeting hall, *Dénouement I-IV* (2006-07) progresses from a dark slate field of angular planes to a less congested field, then on to a diptych that incorporates a red composition with painted slashes in the manner of Lucio Fontana (who was born in Argentina), to conclude with an atmospherically treated surface marked with more illusionistically painted slashes. Kuitca is wrestling with a lot here: the leaden gray evokes Léger rather more than Picasso and Braque, and where the paint is most active, it brings to mind Venice's own Emilio Vedova. The illusionistic slashes recall the painted "tear" in the work *Tu m'* by one of Cubism's great skeptics, Duchamp. It's a brave gambit for an artist to think out loud like this. The handsome paintings are earnest and perplexing, and more than a bit melancholy: where does a painter go after the dénouement?

There is nothing tentative about Rafael Lozano-Hemmer's hardware-heavy and technologically agile works in the Mexican pavilion, accommodated in the 15th-century Palazzo Van Axel near the Rialto. The artist's interactive and kinetic projects (the earliest dates from 1992) establish an interface between electronics, mechanics and the human body. Premiering here is *Wavefunction* (2007), in which the entrance of a visitor into a sensor-rigged room triggers a sequential rising and falling of 50 empty Eames chairs mounted on pistons. The effect is ghostly and slapstick ("please don't get up"), though it's based in some serious technology that involves surveillance systems and a program that generates mechanical behaviors.

Sponsoring one of the more modestly funded national pavilions, Lebanon makes its official debut in a former brewery on the Giudecca with five featured artists plus a supplemental video series presented on a monitor. Most impressive among the works by the principal artists are Mounira Al Solh's *As If I Don't Fit There*, a 12-minute video in which the artist assumes the guise of four women who explain their decision to abandon art-making for other roles and jobs, and Fouad Elkoury's *On War and Love* (2006), a suite of 30 color photographs with texts that detail the wrenching breakup of the artist and his younger lover during the time of last year's shelling of Beirut by Israel. Denied the luxury of humor enjoyed by the love-challenged