



## Thoughts on the 52<sup>nd</sup> International Art Exhibition

by Robert Storr

From Plato onwards philosophers have divided and compartmentalized human consciousness more or less explicitly pitting one faculty against another; mind versus body, reason versus unreason, thought versus feeling, criticality versus intuition, the intellect versus the senses, the conceptual versus the perceptual. At best such dichotomies have served to sharpen our understanding of the different capacities at our disposal for comprehending the world and making our place in it. At worst they have deprived us of some of those abilities by setting up false hierarchies that cause us to mistrust or disparage one for the sake of another, many for the sake of a few.

Yet no matter how successfully philosophers and ideologues have persuaded people that such categories are not just analytically useful but inherently or historically true, the manifold challenges to understanding that reality poses and the actual flux of existence exceed the power of systems, theories and definitions to contain them. The imagination is the catch basin into which this overflow spills and art cuts the channels that reconnect formerly isolated or segregated parts of consciousness to each other while flooding and replenishing the whole of it like a fertile river delta.

***Think with the Senses - Feel with the Mind*** is predicated on the conviction that art is now, as it has always been, the means by which humans are made aware of the whole of their being. However, it does not assume that an enduring wholeness is the result, or that art is a magical solution for the conflicts in our nature or in and among differing cultures and societies. That is the domain of philosophy, the social sciences and politics. Nevertheless, to “make sense” of things in a given moment or circumstance is to grasp their full complexity intellectually, emotionally and perceptually. That effort does not promise that our grasp will hold for long, or even much more than the instant in which we awaken to the fact that such fleeting powers of concentration and transformation are ours. Incidentally, “making nonsense” of the world, as grotesque, Dada or absurdist art does, deploys those same powers through exaggerated disparity. By inverting order and logic the artifact created paradoxically holds fragmented consciousness in suspension so that its contradictions can be clearly apprehended.

Epiphanies happen but do not last. As James Joyce showed, one of the functions of art is to preserve the experience so that we may savor and study its many aspects. The history of art is a fabric of epiphanies woven by many hands at different speeds; the present tense of art is the outer edge of that work in progress. At any point the edge may be ragged and uneven and the pattern in formation disturbing or hard to discern, reflecting the difficulty of making art in troubled times. We are living in just such times. Rather than trim the edge or reweave the pattern to neaten it, this exhibition focuses on selected aspects of current production that hint at what the emerging patterns might be without presuming to map them entirely. No attempt has been made therefore to be programmatically “representative,” either in terms of styles, mediums, generations, nations or cultures. Instead certain qualities and concerns widely found in contemporary art have been used as magnetic poles for gathering work from all seven continents, in all media, in various styles and of all generations now active.

Between the poles to which some works have readily gravitated is a force field where many other works hover. The poles themselves have been used like tuning forks, such that the criterion for selection has been resonance or mood as much as subject matter or aesthetic methodology. Among these vibrating points of reference are the immediacy of sensation in relation to questioning the nature and meaning of that sensation, intimate affect in relation to engagement in public life, belonging and dislocation, the fragility of society and culture in the face of conflict, the sustaining qualities of art in the face of death.

Since the early 20<sup>th</sup> century the development of modern art has been world wide. However its general dissemination and reception have lagged far behind this far flung, simultaneous, and cross-pollinating growth. In recognition of that discrepancy this Biennale has, as in the past, counted to the national pavilions to close the gaps, but it has also incorporated one national pavilion, Turkey, plus a regional pavilion, Africa, within its core, pointing the way, it is hoped, to greater, more permanent inclusiveness in areas of the world and of art-making too long overlooked in the international exhibition circuit.

While this show looks forward it does not look back. No attempt is made to trace genealogies or construct a new canon - and none at all to compete with art fairs or handicap the market. With a handful of exceptions all the artists included are alive and active. Diverse in origin and in temporal vantage points, it is they who conjugate the present tense of art for each other – and for us. The only artists in the show who are not living, would be but for their premature or unexpected deaths; their work is included here because its abiding freshness and impact keeps them on the minds of their peers and the public.

Robert Storr is Director of the 52nd International Art Exhibition