



Hosted at the Irish Pavilion for the 53<sup>rd</sup> Venice Biennial

### HAPPY END

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English translation by Carmela Tutino

One of the last exhibitions I saw was *50 Moons of Saturn*, curated by Daniel Birnbaum<sup>1</sup>. Given the melancholic theme, it should not come as a surprise to anyone that the works shown were mostly gloomy and nihilistic. And yet, in spite of the long and consolidated tradition in which the artist's saturnine temperament is inscribed, I somewhat perceived an atmosphere of weariness and saturation.

If it hadn't been for a work shrewdly entitled *God*, who ate, as it happens, all the others, perhaps I wouldn't have even remembered<sup>2</sup>. The seducing music that accompanied the installation and the video invaded the halls of the museum and was a call that was impossible to escape, closer to the idea of infernal music rather than that of heavenly spheres. By following the echo, you got to a hall decorated with sumptuous purple draperies that clearly suggested that you had slipped into a coffin. A video was projected on the front wall; it was showing the artist singing like an American crooner from the 50s, accompanied by a *Broadway-style* orchestra and repeating the refrain "sorrow conquers happiness". I struggled to leave the scene: I probably could have stayed inside the coffin until the end of the exhibition. Still, I mustered up courage and managed to escape this centripetal movement and went to see the rest of the works.

<sup>1</sup> D. Birnbaum (curated by) *50 Lune di Saturno* (50 Moons in Saturn), Torino Triennial, Skira 2008 catalogue.

<sup>2</sup> The *God*, to whom I refer to, together with Kjartansson, is obviously Saturn himself against whose appetite Francisco Goya had warned us already since 1821.

This is in fact how, thank *God*, they end up standing and gaining a purpose like many small satellites that revolve around the primary planet. Just as in the title, if read in this perspective, becomes extraordinarily consistent until it resembles some sort of existential proposal of coexistence around that myth of success on which our current system is still based. There is a certain honesty in this: we are many on planet Earth, but the World seems to be organized around a single fixation, the success of the Super Me and because, as we know, the Me is destined to perish with us, and transforms itself, all of a sudden, into the Triumph of Death. It is therefore a type of proposal that I'm not inclined to accept, even if the artist, Ragnar Kjartansson, carries us into the maelstrom, singing with obvious pleasure and saving it all *in extremis* just like a big carnival<sup>3</sup>.



Following this first meeting in which the curator's ability appeared to give the exhibitions the right name, with great confidence, I went to the last Biennale di Venezia, entitled, *Making Worlds*, still by Birnbaum. But unfortunately I find the same weariness again, this time without *God*: It's as if the artists had no desire to do what they are doing, and that the various spectators – I am, first of all, referring to myself – drew satisfaction, not so much from the works, but from the fact that, having repeated it so many times, they make your head turn elsewhere, away from the various pavilions and museums, as if they had the task to bring out, by contrast, the beauty of the city, the pleasure of a dinner with good company and even the return home. Yes, because in spite of the collapse of the private sphere that has been largely reported from different parties, and with broad evidence precisely from the visual arts in this Biennale, some of us still have a place to return to, a roof over our heads.

<sup>3</sup> R. Kjartansson, *God*, work presented at the Turin Triennial, *50 Lune di Saturno* (50 Moons in Saturn), in the small building where fine arts are promoted (2009).



The catastrophe that happened then no longer resembles a centripetal movement, but a figure described by Nicéron in *Perspective Curieuse*<sup>4</sup>, a circumference whose outline, seen from the outside, remains unchanged. And yet, this is an anamorphosis, because by looking at the arrangement of the internal points and the inner structure, you see that the centre has shifted to the periphery: The space that it previously occupied is thinning out, while it is growing dense around a marginal point. This new situation is not as fair as the previous one; on the contrary, the disproportionate distribution is quite obvious. It is denser around those who have the most. Entire earth populations migrate to richer countries because they have no other choice. But at the same time, the “West” no longer occupies the centre stage not even for itself. Behind any artistic event, there are big investors who must obviously protect their interests. In this sense, art is political and it should be remembered. But, at the same time, no one dreams of being represented by apocalyptic or spectacular images, as the ones you can see in the various exhibitions. Irrespective of the technique, lesser works generate more interest, at least when they suggest that the artist has put a lot of effort in not having even his last shred of pleasure in cherishing a gesture or a subject be snatched away from him.

On the other hand, from the avant-garde movement onwards, various languages purposely “came into the world”, and you cannot expect that the world does not use them as it wishes.

A few days ago, for example, my former colleague was telling me, amused, that during her spare moments, she is writing a book in collaboration with another office worker. *How nice – she tells me – it's something completely absurd, I write a piece and I send it to him by e-mail; he continues with the story as he wishes and then he sends it back to me. In this way, we are completely*

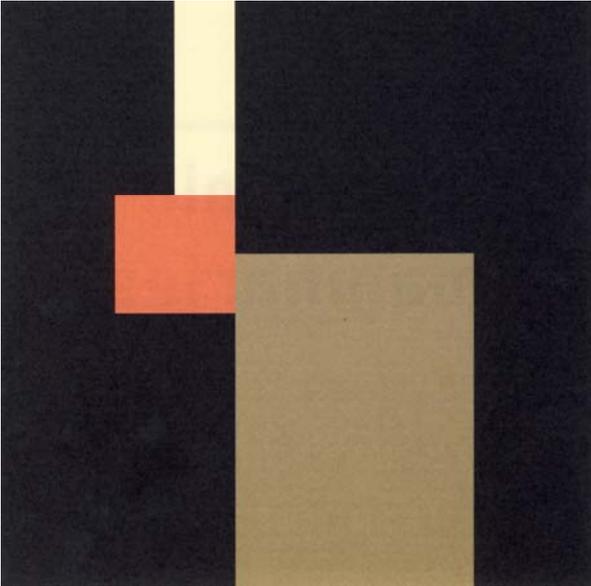
<sup>4</sup> J. F. Nicéron, *Perspective Curieuse*, Book I, by Father F.J.F.N. Parisien from the Ordre des Minimes. The first edition dates back to 1638.

*dependent on one another.* I immediately think of the exquisite corpse and that after all, this is what André Breton really wanted.

The “critic” looks at me a little perplexed. He doesn’t seem much inclined to share my enthusiasm. But one must keep in mind that while some bored artists are “striving” to find an idea for the exhibition because this is their job, there are people who do more or less the same things, when and where they wish, and find pleasure in doing them. The difference, if any, should be demonstrated and, if possible, not only in terms of money<sup>5</sup>: Sometimes this happens by good fortune, but for a language to be alive, it must be spoken, and I don’t see for what reason speech should not flow through other places, unrecognised, or whatever you want to call it, to make it grow together. So, by speaking, I want to bring back pleasure to the front place, and this time I take Mr. Birbaum’s invitation very seriously: I will see the Biennale with calm starting from here.

As the saying goes, “The early bird gets the worm”, so I get up early. I look at the passing tourists for a while and find them very beautiful. I first go to the Irish pavilion which is just outside the gardens, in the same complex as the guest house I am staying at. Perhaps it’s my lucky day, because the exhibition is really interesting: It links all the themes that I have dealt with in my thesis. Sarah Browne brings a carpet and puts it in a room painted entirely white with dark wooden window frames. The carpet’s design recalls Mondrian, it picks up the colours of the surroundings and you can walk on it barefoot. It’s very soft and has a nice smell, it’s quite pleasant. She tells us how and by whom it is produced; it’s not a “new” idea, but it’s only fair to repeat it and I am not at all bored.

<sup>5</sup> An idea of what the difference shown in terms of money is given in *Mapping the Studio*, the collection by Francois Pinault. Among other things, the selection of the works supports the apocalyptic fixation that, in the long run, is likely to build a refuge for lack of other ideas. F. Bonami, A. Gingeras (curated by), *Mapping the Studio: Artists from the François Pinault Collection*, exhibition catalogue, Electra 2009.



Gareth Kennedy, on the other hand, tried to get the authorisation to play in public in the Dublin Docklands, the new cultural and financial city centre. He didn't succeed, and so this brings us to the conversation with an employee and the photographs of an unexpressed possibility: street musicians and strangers in front of impenetrable buildings.

Together in a "short-circuit" partnership under the Kennedy Browne name, they resume with a 1980 radio monologue of Milton Friedman, where a simple pencil becomes the symbol of the union between the people that the free market should be able to implement. The passage, submitted to Google<sup>6</sup>, the automatic translation programme of the global network of the day, becomes an insane and authentic surreal essay so that the true meaning of the discourse is clarified exactly at the moment it is lost. In the next room, on the roof of a building, perhaps one of those under which the street musician is standing, we see a person with his back turned as in Friedrich's paintings. It's a girl who is concentrated in sharpening a pencil. She does it thoroughly, as best as she can, until she gets a perfect tip.



The pencil sharpener is made in China and the pencil in Germany; it has a bright yellow colour just like certain buses parked on the side of the street down below.

To these two contemporary artists, and to the girl that kept the exhibition open, who offered me the catalogue and stopped to talk to me, this conclusion is for you: Our dialogue will always save our language; there are many things inside it, and among them there is also painting. I know for sure that inside the monolithic buildings of the multinational corporations there are people willing to *make conversation*.

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<sup>6</sup> <http://translate.google.it/#>

