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Wars of Roses

Crossing the little bridge over the Rio dei Giardini that separates the first international pavilions from the newcomers in the 1930s and wandering to the left, we find ourselves standing in a somewhat disheveled garden, the ruin of something more formal between the canal and the tired facades of a few countries. We pause in the ragged grass and face a seemingly immaculate, clearly defined blank wall with the handwritten words *AMO ERGO SUM* in shiny white metal floating in front of it. The wall itself floats in the garden with a large framed rectangular opening in the middle, through which we can see a blot of red. Moving closer, the blot breaks up into small discrete red clouds and hints at a geometric garden filled with surprisingly tall flowers. Passing through the hole, the garden on the other side turns out to be a precise grid of 312 roses, a kind of red army standing at attention in the sun. Each bloom is not made of delicate petals but translucent, blobby, congealed and bloody glass, violently pierced by the shiny blade of a scalpel. Or is it that the blooms have given birth to the razor-sharp knives? The rose not defended by thorns but a thorn in its own right. Tenderness/violence, softness/hardness, desire/repulsion, sensuality/aggression, surface/edge, curve/straight line, vagina/penis are all blurred here or tumble into and out of each other. The masculine and feminine stereotypes that engineer the pervasive brutalities of everyday life are overlapped, inverted and subverted in a kind of painful beauty.

There is an irresistible urge to touch these alluring dangerous flowers hovering at the same level as our hearts, even to lean over to smell them, at the risk of getting cut, but a glass pane holds us

back at the threshold. We stand between the two gardens, the public Giardini and the private courtyard of the pavilion. The architecture offers no protection. In fact, the Austrian pavilion designed by Josef Hoffmann in 1934 is not a building but a thin screen inserted into the Giardini and propped up by some rooms used as galleries. The real rooms are outside the structure yet produced by it. The public garden in front was originally very formal, and its geometric lines of plants, seating, flower beds, grass, and paths guided the visitor toward the screen that is textured with thin grooves that accentuate its horizontality and produce the effect of a hovering fabric. The screen is slightly raised, as if on exhibition, or simply to dramatize the hole by turning it into a kind of window through which the smaller courtyard garden on the other side and the trees beyond it can be glimpsed. The grass beds and the set of steps up out of the slightly sunken garden are directly lined up with the opening so that the perspectival effect passes right through it. The screen is so integrated into the geometry of the planting that it appears to be part of the garden, turning the garden itself into an interior with the lines of trees completing the effect. Rather than offer a building to the garden, Hoffmann turned the garden into a kind of building.

The experience of passing through the screen is to move from this large garden room to a smaller one but, despite the symmetry of the building, direct axial passage is impeded, turning the framed garden into a view, a picture. The visitors can’t see a way up until very close to the screen when two sets of hidden steps to either side require a last-minute detour, forcing them to slide along the face of the screen before the inner secret of this picture can be entered. On turning around and looking back through the hole toward the public garden the same thing happens in reverse. The screen shrinks and magnifies the garden architecture, like looking through each end

of a telescope. The screen is ultimately not placed in the garden—it is a device that transforms the garden.

Gardens are never innocent. Formal gardens are classically the very image of femininity, controlled. Liquid, organic, interactive—biology tamed by geometry and highly choreographed movements. The garden grid of knife-roses puts this logic on steroids and cannily subverts it. Nothing is tamed here. On the contrary.

Soft, sensual roses and hard, sharp menacing blades. The theme runs through Renate Bertlmann's work. Tenderness and violence—nipples and blades, comfort and pain. Comfort as pain. Or the comfort of pain, as in S-M practices. Not as extreme behavior but as norm. The sadomasochism of everyday life. Bertlmann reveals the contract in our relationships, amorous relationships from the cradle, the infant pacifier, the mother's nipple—to the continuous violence of personal relationships, to the violence of institutions, the art world, the Biennale itself, among many.

AMO ERGO SUM, I love therefore I am. The counter to Descartes's *cogito ergo sum*, I think therefore I am. But love is not simple. It has never been. It will never be. Only in soapy, sugary novels and films. Uninteresting, unreal. There is no knowledge without pain. Love is harder than thought. The rose has thorns. In literature, the red rose is the symbol of love and sensuality but also of blood.

The history of the Biennale of Venice is also the history of violence, of power, of appropriation, of war—a garden full of blood. The ground itself of the Giardini is artificial, made with the

rubble of monasteries and churches that Napoleon ordered destroyed during his occupation of Venice to diminish religious power in the city. Marsh land was turned into a garden for the "public good." Entertainment as enlightenment (something that persists in the Biennale today). This French artificial ground became Austrian when Napoleon ceded Venice to the Habsburgs. With the unification of Italy in 1861, the Giardini became Italian. But what did it mean to be Italian? "We have made Italy," politician Massimo d'Azeglio famously said, "Now we need to make Italians." Exhibitions were seen as a way to build a new subject, to instill a sense of national identity, and Venice was one of the genetic laboratories.

A bloody garden, then, in which national pavilions only started to be built after Italian artists complained that foreigners were taking too much space in the central exhibition building. Nations were invited to build their own pavilions. Not by chance the first ones were colonial powers. Belgium in 1907, followed by Great Britain, Germany, and Hungary (still part of the Austro-Hungarian Empire) in 1909. In 1912 came France and Sweden (who soon after sold its pavilion to the Netherlands in a kind of geopolitical real estate market) and in 1914, Russia. During War World I the Biennale was closed and did not reopen until 1920. With the rise of Fascism in Italy in 1922, the Biennale became an instrument of direct fascist control until 1942. In 1924, a bust of Mussolini greeted visitors at the entrance. Nevertheless, another wave of pavilions began, including Austria.

1934, the year the Austrian pavilion opened, was not an innocent year. Hitler visited the Biennale upon Mussolini's invitation, but chose to skip the Austrian contribution. By 1938, the Austrian pavilion had closed, and Austrian artists were presented in the German pavilion. The Hoffmann structure was put up for sale, unsuccessfully. A 1938 map of the Biennale shows the pavilion

with a blank flag, and its space was used for storage by the Cinecittà film studio until it reopened after the war.

In fact, there was never an innocent year for the Biennale. The Giardini are a battlefield—designed for conflict. The idyllic trees and the sense of withdrawal from the rhythms and density of everyday life in Venice, which is itself a famous place of escape from the world, are by no means a refuge from the bloodshed of violent nationalisms, racisms, and sexisms. On the contrary, the Giardini is a place in which the pride of colonial powers is exactly matched by the sense of inferiority it so successfully produced in those nations, and women, excluded from the garden.

And now the first solo exhibition of a woman artist in the Austrian pavilion, but not the first time only works of women are exhibited. In 1980, the artist-architect Hans Hollein invited VALIE EXPORT and Maria Lassnig, who made strong feminist interventions in the space. In fact, the pavilion that has showcased so many men had itself been feminized from the beginning. Not by chance was Hoffmann explicitly and repeatedly feminized by his rival and tireless critic Adolf Loos for making work that is too light, sensuous, decorative, and screenlike, as if made of cardboard. Yet this very thinness and the subtlety of the abstract ornamentation and minimalism of the structure, accentuated by the two red sofas at the opening, gave it an aura of extreme modernity, a sense of modernity that paradoxically even increases with time. In Hollein's words from 1984, when he celebrated the fiftieth anniversary of the pavilion by making an exhibition about it inside it: "Hoffmann has succeeded in presenting architecture in an absolute form,

reduced to essential elements, close to uselessness" and accomplished "the destruction of tectonic mass."[1] If every line of an architect, no matter how kindly offered, is a violent cut, and every mass of a building is a repressive block, the one cut offered by the pavilion, the split of a garden by a thin screen with a hole in it, is already opening a possible dialogue with the exclusions and repressions that architecture typically organizes.

The knife-roses are at their most subversive in tweaking this opening. Nothing is changed. It is as if the artist has instinctively pierced the repressed unconscious of the place. For a moment, everything is brought to the surface in all its attractiveness and menace. The blood that made the ground of the Giardini and energized all the ongoing politics of nation and gender now appears right in front of us as an artwork—forcing us to think.

[1] Hans Hollein, "Josef Hoffmann's Pavilion at the Biennale of Venice," in *Josef Hoffmann, I 50 anni del Padiglione Austriaco. Biennale di Venezia. 50 Jahre österreichischer Pavillon . Biennale Venedig. The 50th Anniversary of the Austrian Pavilion. Biennale of Venice*. Salzburg: Residenz, 1984, p. 20.