

Maria Lind

A CURATOR QUEUES
AND SWEATS AND
CHATTERS – AND
WONDERS IF SHE
REALLY NEEDS TO
BE AT ANOTHER
TEFLON BIENNALE

After six hours of queuing, sweating and chitchatting with more people than I can remember (plus a few glimpses of art in between), I come across something that made not only my day, but my whole trip to the Venice Biennale this summer. At the back of the Giardini, in the far corner of the Uruguay Pavilion, I sat on a simple stool and watched a seven-minute video playing on a loop: *Methodology* (2011) by Alejandro Cesarco.

Projected onto a white landscape-oriented board held by a tripod-like stand, the video shows a young man and a young woman in conversation. They are moderately good-looking and simply dressed. In the beginning they are sitting next to each other at a table by a window; later they sit at opposite sides of another table (or is it the same one?), in front of a bookcase. The setting is domestic, and both tables are adorned with piles of books and a red lamp. The second table also holds a white cup of black coffee and a glass bowl containing a pair of goldfish.

The two protagonists speak softly in subtitled Spanish as they engage in dense arguments about secrets and silences, about what can be said and what can't. Black frames indicate cuts in the video, when we as viewers are invited to pause with the action. The edited conversation covers the relationships of others, the writing of letters, influence, pseudonyms and dedications, and how absence might operate as a guarantor of meaning in language. But what happens when absence becomes a presence and concealment is made visible? Secrets can function to generate societal dynamics, and something that is not mentioned in a text can still structure it, argues one of the characters. The atmosphere in the video is dense and the dialogue is not entirely logical to outsiders. It is just as easy to imagine that the two are a couple as it is to imagine that they simply go their separate ways once the conversation ends. Nevertheless it's clear from their whispered intimacy that the characters

must know each other very well. There is a framed letter on the wall next to the stand which I assumed belonged to the work, but it was the video that absorbed me. I didn't read the letter; instead I watched the video one more time.

Experiencing this short but touching video was worth all my frustrations and disappointment with the 2011 Venice Biennale. To be fair, Markus Schinwald in the Austrian Pavilion, Yael Bartana in the Polish Pavilion and Dora García in the Spanish Pavilion, plus works by Mai-Thu Perret, Dani Gal and Carol Bove in the Arsenale, all offered something valuable, but that's scant reward from so large an event. And otherwise I left Venice almost disillusioned. In Venice the trend for 'Teflon-biennials' began in 2005 (when the 51st edition was directed by Maria de Corral and Rosa Martínez), and subsequent editions have become yet more polished and consumer friendly. They operate in roughly the same way as a smoothly crafted shopping mall, which wants to create a seemingly effortless experience so as to make you feel good. At the Teflon biennials very little, or nothing, stands out. Consequently we

lose the kind of friction that is one of art's biggest assets. It's a friction that forces you to see, feel and think about things differently, however slightly so. Instead visitors are flushed through a well-designed and aptly engineered Biennale where there is just enough stimulation to avoid boredom and keep you prepared to consume more.

Let's be clear, this is not the fault of the artworks or the artists. Rather, it is the curators who are to blame. In terms of selection, there are too many works operating on the same register, using similar tones of voice; in terms of installation, everything is also too monotonous, and cumulative rather than synergetic. Consequently there's less and less to distinguish the Biennale from art fairs. Yet, despite this, *Methodology* retains its integrity. Of course this is certainly easier to achieve in a smallish pavilion housing works by only two artists than it is, for example, in the frighteningly long space of the Arsenale. Nevertheless, the work stands out by offering a moment of thoughtfulness, if not contemplation, which retains elements of the unresolved.

I came back to watch Cesarco's video one more time, on this occasion in the early morning, after the crowds from the preview days had gone. The Giardini was almost empty. I saw new things in the work: when the man and the woman are seated at the first table, she is resting her arms on a notebook, holding a pen. I realise that while speaking about writing, and the need to signify desire, they are discussing the parallels between writing and love. "The suspension of disbelief" is the first line of the video, said in chorus by the man and the woman. I find myself smiling and decide to write a letter.

