

Summary

MONIKA BRAUN (Academy of Fine Arts in Wrocław) / La Biennale di Venezia, or the usefulness (and uselessness) of art

An integral part of the Venezia Biennale is the competition. Not only the one included in the regulations, resulting in awards, prizes, and the promotion of works and people in the broadest sense of the word, but also an unregulated agon, a constant competition: who is more eccentric, weirder, more astonishing, who in which newspaper, by which art critic, in which gallery, by which curator... This race, which is visible to the viewer, often makes an artwork created in such a way something one-dimensional, worthy of just a glance, unworthy of reflection. When we visit the Biennale, we also feel a bit like in an amusement park that is trying to embody the idea of the “house of pleasure”, a model art exhibition according to the Swedish painter Öyvind Fahlström, who “was convinced that eventually museums will include theatres, discos, meditation rooms, a kind of funfair, gardens, restaurants, hotels, swimming pools and galleries selling replicas”. Yet, due to the guards, cameras, barriers and other modern systems defending access to art, the festival, which the organisers invite to, becomes just one more embodiment of the museum as a mausoleum. The mechanism that try to keep the whole carefully constructed illusion of participation at the Biennial from time to time breaks down. From a co-participant in the creative processes you become a spectator effectively moved at a distance, a guest under special supervision. Art is always in a sense utilitarian, and “objects [entering into a dialogue with us] can be beautiful, witty, brilliant, sophisticated, but also unsophisticated, banal, malicious” – are able (or not) to do something with us. This first category, in a way, “makes a conversation” with its recipients, stimulates them to their own research and suggests its discoveries to them. The second category is, let’s say, flat, without the inner dimension, static. It does not allow the movement of thought and imagination, it even hinders the dynamics of the body, which actively wants to explore the object of art – it transforms engagement into inertia, passivity, makes the viewer indifferent, even if at the first moment it attracts externally his or her eyesight externally. It is useless. To “use” a work of art is to be able, thanks to it, to understand the world – physical and spiritual – in a new way, to reinterpret phenomena from fields other than visual arts, to feel the vibrations of the globe, impossible to examine in other ways, to look inside oneself and others, to feel excitement, curiosity, emotion... Was it possible to use works of art in this way in Venice? Probably yes – sometimes, fragmentarily, in accordance with one of the constitutive features of contemporary art: “always a fragment”, which I used in this text as well, although La Biennale di Venezia is a good starting point for many other observations in the fields of visual arts, social life, performance, cultural anthropology, criticism, etc., etc.