Have I ever been completely awake?

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"Have I ever been completely awake?"
Peter Fischli & David Weiss

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The numbers of the 55th Venice Biennale:[1]

- over 475,000 visitors
- 161 artists from 38 countries
- 88 National Participations
- 10 countries participating for the first time:
  Angola, Bahamas, Kingdom of Bahrain, Republic of Côte d'Ivoire,
  the Republic of Kosovo, Kuwait, Maldives, Paraguay, Tuvalu, the Holy See
- 47 collateral events promoted by international organizations and institutions
  held in different locations in Venice.

introduction
It was a gesture of hospitality that made my first visit to the 55th International Art Exhibition of the Venice Biennale a bewildering experience.
The friendly gesture revealed the status of indifference I had so willingly accepted in this abundant environment.
As a budding artist I clearly had found my Achilles heel.
This unsettling observation challenged me to research my experience as a case study and to try and explain it from a broader point of view.

the visit
Venice's dream of splendor surrounded me like a tormented blanket of dissolving fog, awaiting the decisive snapping of unknown fingers to reveal life's daily struggle, which is well concealed behind this immaculate facade. Meanwhile a mass hysteria of tourists, swarming through the narrow winding streets and crawling over the water on stinking, rattling taxi boats takes advantage of her opaque generosity. Probably this number triples when the Biennale beast is on stage.

The whole thing started off with the slogan 'Welcome to Iraq'.
A generous invitation, brought by a banner suspended from the high windows of a breathtaking 16th century palazzetto on the Grand Canal in Venice:
the Iraqi pavilion.
As this friendly salute was not to be ignored, I went in.

After crossing a gracious courtyard a wide stone curved staircase unfolds, leading me with petit steps and a half turn to the first floor. A rather small (though 100% fire-resistant) door snaps me out of the calming Renaissance décor. For a second I hesitate. Empty minded I stare at the pitiful yellowish door.

I open the door.

I bump into a pop-up kiosk setting: a provisional writing desk on the left, up on the wall, two t-shirts with a single black-line cartoon, hung from a thin wire. The one on the left depicts an artist, complete with palette, canvas and easel, making a painting en plein air of the bomb that is hurtling in his direction. The second t-shirt depicts a man in the middle of an empty street, lined with non-specific house blocs, two tormented palms in the background, his forefingers in his ears while acceptably looking at the bomb that is plummeting down.
The rest of the small hallway is filled with open cardboard boxes, t-shirts piling out, paper stacks and more stacks. I look up.
Two identical t-shirts, containing good-natured Biennale employees, look welcoming in my direction and nod affirmatively. I close the door.

Clumsily, I move sideways, with my back to the wall, work my way into the apartment.
While sliding sideways I encounter a wall hung with 12 photographs of approx. 25 cm by 40cm; images of Iraqi people in familiar surroundings – two men with sheep on a street, a soldier sitting against a wall, a butcher in his shop, a group of visiting businessmen in a hotel room, a glamour model with blue socks sitting on the edge of a bare bed – nothing remarkable, except for the fact that they're holding a black-and-white life-size portrait of Saddam Hussein's face in front of their face.[2]
The mask of the perpetrator spread out as a veil over the country, not yet able to forget, made visible. The photograph as tag: "Saddam was here".
One depicts a butcher between carcasses and lumps of flesh suspended from iron meat hooks. It makes me shiver. This image seems to sum up the whole cruel history of Iraq.

I zoom in at the photographs and scan the surface. In every photograph my eyes decide to rest at the hands of the person portrayed, which tenderly hold up the portrait of Saddam. A portrait in a portrait.
They remind me of the first portrait I made of my father, holding up a photograph of a bird, in a tree. Photo's in photo's mess with the brain of the beholder.

I turn to the right and move on.

An elegant decorated 16th century Venice apartment unfolds. I peer into the rectangular living room. High dark wooden ceilings and generous windows enable the daylight to transform the décor to a Peter Greenaway setting. Every element subordinates to the light and as such seems carefully and thoughtfully put on a specific spot. The Iraqi make-over turned out well.
The vibrant colored tapestry and cushions add to the poetic calming elegant atmosphere.

The oddness of this ambiguous situation penetrates my awareness. The thick isolating layer of comfort makes me feel ill at ease. How does this salon atmosphere relate to the actual situation in Iraq?
Is this how one could define a former dictatorial regime? A layer of calm coating the surface, in which, apparently, normal life finds it way, while underneath, something pitch dark is working overtime, a decaying merciless breathing, an elusive termite, prepared to destroy everything that brings joy?

An open door shows a small kitchen. A small glass tea pot with 5 cups on the worktop. I hesitate; is this part of the exhibition? I decide not.
Next to the kitchen is a small cozy room with two chaise longues in front of a movie screen.
One of the chaises is occupied by a young bohemian looking woman – green bandana + cossack black trousers – laying comfortably, yet concentrated, on the chair.

Stiffly I sit down and focus on the moving image in front of me. The sound of crickets and cracking campfire bounces of the screen. The pixelating quality adds to its realness. The realness doesn't enter.
Exactly what am I looking at? At the actual event, or the fictional event?
How can you know what is real when the world is represented entirely by images?[3] All content is embraced at the same level.
Instead of rolling credits I read that two of the men just introduced in the movie have been killed by customs police, a few days after filming.
Smuggling alcohol from Iraq to Iran on a camel turns out to be serious business.

I wearily get up and walk into the next room.

I think of death. Dismiss this thought. I make a 360º survey of the small room; cardboard sculptures representing furniture, which make up the contents of an entire bedroom: a bed, a bedside table, a bookcase, a washbasin, a suitcase, a two seats-sofa. The bed transforms into a coffin.
I feel confused about the message of this installation.
Although it has a witty twist, at the same time it makes me feel sad. The cardboard is scarily new, this detoning element leaves me clueless. New cardboard and Iraq just don't fit together.

I turn and walk into the rectangular living room.

I take a seat at a round dinner table cramped with books and two laptops on either side.
The laptops are fastened with a kind of bicycle locks.
On the screen two modern looking young men walk through battered streets; nervously and feverishly talking with each other and a third party through a mobile phone. The nervous negotiation and weighing of risks concerns the temporary use of an apartment as a love nest.

My minds wanders off and contemplates the ambiguity of the scene I just saw.

The whole situation is pretty odd in itself. The generously offered comfort just doesn't feel right. Like I'm being poked by a distant voodoo ritual.

I slide the chair to the table and walk to the light and peek out the open window.
Imagine 16th century Venice. The hot air touches my face. The moaning sounds of the continuous traffic jam of water taxi’s, private boats and gondolas seems far away.

I turn around.

I notice the apartment is extensively equipped with books. Small stacks of books seem to be everywhere, every table is packed; catalogues, novels, history, cookbooks, and so on.

At the left side stands an extended six-seater sofa, the surface covered with colorful blankets and cushions, decorated with geometrical forms, leaning against a light green cloth – which functions as the back of the sofa. Above it hang three oil paintings, all the same size, classical landscape paintings, in a strong figurative style, depicting villagers in Iraq's marshlands.
Opposite the sofa are two large-scale abstract paintings, consisting of layers of thin transparent colors, and childlike, mostly amorphous, line drawings and stenciled shapes and sequences of numbers and letters that bring about an unclear message; a mix between fresco and graffiti.

At the low round table in front of the sofa, heaps of books are piled up. The travel guide '*Iraq: then & now: a guide to the country and its people. 2008.*' absorbs my attention. It never occurred to me Iraq is a place where I really could go. I feel caught out.

I glance at the table with the heap of books in front of me:
Irak; Land zwischen Euphrat und Tigris, Treasures of the Iraq Museum,
Baghdad FC: Iraq's Football Story. A hidden story of sport and tyranny,
Shoot an Iraqi: Art, life and Resistance under the Gun,
A modern history of the Kurds, The occupation of Iraq, Ancient Iraq,
Florence and Baghdad: Renaissance Art and Arab Science,
The Iraqi cookbook, The looting of the Iraq museum,
The monument: art and vulgarity in Saddam Hussein's Iraq, The letters of Getrude Bell (Volume II), Baghdad: The lost legacy of ancient Mesopotamia,
What kind of liberation? Woman and the occupation of Iraq,
Babylon's Ark: the incredible wartime rescue of the Baghdad Zoo,
My Iraq: a photographic autobiography, Everyday life in Ancient Mesopotamia,
Das Hofhaus in Bagdad: Prototyp einer vieltausendjährigen Wohnform,
Understanding Iraq: A Whistlestop Tour from Ancient Babylon to Occupied Baghdad, Detailed Guide to the Maps of Baghdad, The Marsh Arabs,
Late for tea at the Deer Palace: the lost dreams of my Iraqi family,
Songs, Hundred Iraqi Songs, Iraq: Images from the past, Schéhérazade,
Les instruments de musique en Iraq et leur rôle dan la société traditionnelle.

Empty, confused, I leave the pavilion. Outside I dissolve in one of the thousands shadows swarming the opulent city of Venice.

the pavilion
The Iraqi presence at the Biennale is only the second time in 35 years. It is the first time the exhibition consists entirely of artists based in Iraq.

The pavilion was commissioned by the Ruya Foundation for Contemporary Culture in Iraq. Ruya's chairwoman, Tamara Chalabi, chose Jonathan Watkins, director of the Ikon gallery in Birmingham, England, to curate the exhibition. Together they crisscrossed Iraq to find new talents, from which 11 artists were chosen for the exhibition.

The statement of the Ruya Foundation sheds light on the title of the show, 'Welcome to Iraq':
"The title of our show is intended to entice the audience to come and take a peek inside the country, and while it would seem they may be met with the predictability of destruction and chaos that is present day Iraq, what they will be faced with is quite different. […] with immense pride we say welcome to our country, welcome to Iraq."[4]

From the catalogue and several interviews I understand that Watkins' goal in curating the exhibition is showing the normality of Iraq. The exhibition itself is the medium.
In his own words:
"Millions of people get up everyday, make breakfast, get their children ready for school, go to work or not, have lunch, go shopping, meet friends, have dinner, watch TV, get ready for bed and so on.
A small percentage of a small percentage might come to some harm through a violent act of terrorism, but normally, for the vast majority, the daily round is a question of making do and getting by in difficult circumstances. […]
An apartment in a grand house, a palazzetto on the Grand Canal, it is as welcoming as Iraq on the whole is not."[5]

the experience
The unsettling encounter with the Iraqi pavilion occupied me enough to make it the theme of my thesis. In this context I research how to explain this severe impact of imposed 'normality'.

the Stendhal syndrome
It clearly was not Stendhal's syndrome.[6] Although the whole experience was profound and occupied me intensely, I didn't recognize any of the physical and mental phenomena that are characteristic for this illness. It was this decisive snapping of unknown fingers, raising the fog, the opposite of being in ecstasy; I was woken up.

If I was awake, then clearly I was passive, before. Was it only passivity, or was there more to it? What could explain my experience in the pavilion?

the concept of interpassivity
The concept of interpassivity originated in the domain of art theory. In the mid-90's the Austrian philosopher of art Robbert Pfaller and the Slovenian culture critic Slavoj Žižek developed this theoretical tool as opposed to the predominant concept of *interactivity*.[7]
The concept has recently been broadened and updated by philosopher and cultural critic Gijs van Oenen to describe transformations in society concerning the domain of politics, governance, labor and the public realm.[8] Van Oenen distinguishes signs of interpassivity in the form of e.g. capsularisation, detachment, disinterest and outsourcing.[9]

In the context of this thesis, and for the sake of clarity, I'll restrict the concept of interpassivity to the domain of the arts.

the core of the concept of interpassivity
Pfaller describes the concept of interpassivity as opposed to that of interactivity:
”Interactivity in the arts means that observers must not only indulge in observation, but also have to contribute creative 'activity' for the completion of the artwork. The interactive artwork is a work that is not yet finished, but 'waits' for some creative work that has to be added to it by the observer.[10]
What could be the inverse structure of that?
The artwork, then, would already be more than finished. Not only no activity, but also no passivity would have to be added to it. Observers would be relieved from creating as well as from observing. The artwork would be an artwork that observes itself.”[11]

Van Oenen points out a condition of society which is inextricably linked with enormous art manifestations as the Venice Biennale:
“Ever more interactivity is being generated in many fields of social life. This is normatively welcomed by both institutions and individual citizens, but simultaneously the demands of interactivity tend to systematically overburden both. […] Accordingly, […], democratic individuals suffer from *interactive metal fatigue*. […] Symptoms of this condition may be called signs of *interpassivity*, and are now starting to show up, in the form of e.g. aversion, capsularization, detachment, disinterest and outsourcing.”[12]

Could this definition help explain my experience, which seems closer to interactivity, in the sense that the situation in the pavilion clearly provoked interaction with me?

the explanation
The concept of interpassivity clarifies what is at stake from a more general point of view.
The Venice Biennale challenges an incessant interactivity with its visitors.
The enormousness of the event makes it impossible to interact with everything presented. The brain isn't up processing a bombardment of information.[13]
A sign of this condition of overburden is disinterest, or, to use another term, indifference.
This raises the question how to open up this condition.
In the case of the Iraqi pavilion it was the invitation 'Welcome to Iraq' that broke through the dominant stream of suggested interactivity; it *was* interaction.
The plainness of the gesture snapped me out of my lethargy and opened up the possibility to interact with the exhibition in the Iraqi pavilion.
Which consisted of a straightforward challenging of general prejudices on Iraq: the contrasting messages of the artworks presented, the diversity of books, and the contemplating atmosphere of the apartment.

Two layers of interpassivity were addressed: indifference, caused by a persistent and dominant media-image on Iraq of destruction and chaos, and, indifference, caused by an overwhelming environment.

conclusion

The encounter with the Iraqi pavilion changed my understanding on Iraq and its people, and made me aware of the shroud of interpassivity which dominates events like the Venice Biennale.

The popularity of such events, proudly presented by the Venice organization, raises the importance of the mechanisms linked with interpassivity. As they color the relation between artwork and observer.

Therefore these mechanisms are inextricably linked with art practice. Consequently, awareness of interpassivity is indispensable for artists and curators alike.

[1] www.labiennale.org
[2] Welcome to Iraq, *The Pavilion of Iraq at the 55th International Art Exhibition la Biennale di Venezia*, catalog (2013), Jonathan Wilkins, p. 62.
[3] Crimp, Douglas, Pictures, Volume 8, number 1, Fall 2005, Artists Space, p. 17.
[4] Welcome to Iraq, p. 8-9.
[5] Welcome to Iraq, p. 13.
[6] "A psychosomatic disorder that causes rapid heartbeat, dizziness, fainting, confusion and even hallucinations when an individual is exposed to art, usually when the art is particularly beautiful or a large amount of art is in a single place." http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Stendhal_syndrome
[7] Further reading: Pfaller, R. *Ästhetik der Interpassivität*, Philo Phine Arts (2009), Žižek, S., *The plague of fantasies, Verso Books (2009).*
[8] Further reading: Van Oenen, G., Nu even niet! Over de interpassieve samenleving, Van Gennep (2011).
[9] Van Oenen, G., Interactive metal fatigue. The interpassive transformation of modern life. Presentation at Studiedag Theaterwetenschap 2007, Brakke Grond, Amsterdam.
[10] An example of interactivity in connection to an artwork is a performance in which the observer is expected to perform an act.
[11] Faller, R., "Backup op little gestures of disappearance: Interpassivity and the Theory of Ritual. Journal of European Psychoanalysis: Humanities, Philosophy, Psychotherapies 16 (2003).
[12] Van Oenen, G., Interactive metal fatigue. The interpassive transformation of modern life. Presentation at Studiedag Theaterwetenschap 2007, Brakke Grond, Amsterdam.
[13] Marois, R. and Ivanoff, J., Elsevier, TRENDS in Cognitive Sciences, Vol.9 No. 6 June 2005, p. 298.