



A Historical Turning Point: in Venice?

Simone Leigh:
Brick House, 2019
Bronze, 4.9 m height
2.7 m diameter

Can an exhibition mark a “historical turning point”? We live amidst quasi-magical incantations, so perhaps we should exercise caution. After all, the attack on Ukraine has led the European Union, Great Britain, the USA, Canada, Japan and to a certain extent also Switzerland to once again approve and practice a firm stance of “deterrence.” From the 1950s onwards, this was the West’s political slogan for the Cold War. Its recent, politically unanimous, now persistent usage has been defined as a “*Zeitenwende*,” the German term for an epochal turning point, which in Germany is now even being translated as “watershed.” At the same time, the term “revolution” is used as a signal of militant resolve. As during the Cuban Missile Crisis in 1962, when the West demanded a “roll back” of the Soviet Union, we now have a unanimous demand for the withdrawal of Russia, ruled by Putin and strangling Ukraine. **Thus the term “turning point” emphatically expresses a hope: this far and no further; and pronto, please, go all the way back. In Venice the cards are mixed differently. The title is “The Milk of Dreams:” no threats, no battles loom on the near horizon.** However, Katharina Fritsch’s life-size green elephant on its high, oval base acts as a sign of very great power. The “Brick House” in the *Arsenale*, by Simone Leigh, who like Fritsch was awarded the *Golden Lion*, is also a highly charged work, a piece of architecture, crowned by a female, faceless head, weighing 2.7 tons and nearly five meters tall, reminiscent of an earthen hut in Benin or Togo. Africa is slowly finding a home everywhere. Let us also mention Barbara Kruger, whose wall- and floor-filling texts in the *Arsenale* bring the extraordinarily rich *59th International Exhibition La Biennale di Venezia* to a virtual conclusion. Countless words impinge, indeed hammer on our attention here. On an orange-red screen in the middle of the room, words and phrases appear in a series of abortive iterations until at last a well-known credo comes to the fore: “I pledge allegiance to the flag of the United States of America and to the Republic for which it stands, one Nation under God, indivisible, with liberty and justice for all.” **The epochal turning point in Venice, if one were to press it into a formula, would be a quiet, persistent vow, which Cecilia Alemani, the extraordinarily capable curator, deliberately avoids uttering. She does say what she thinks. She initially considered naming her exhibition “Rebirth,” but felt that was too optimistic. She invokes the artist Leonora Carrington as star witness; the title “The Milk of Dreams” comes from her.**

Pioneering figures in Alemani's intellectual development were Donna Haraway with a "Cyborg Manifesto" 40 years ago; the philosopher Silvia Federici, whose research on feminism is reflected in one of the catalogue texts; Rosi Braidotti, who has developed a "Post Human Critical Theory;" as well as Marina Warner, who describes the relationship between female artists and magic. In the end, however, Alemani declares herself with the sentence: "No historical narrative can ever be considered final." **Nevertheless, the Venice Biennale 2022, with its national pavilions and some "Collateral Events," sends the signal, unlike almost any other cultural event, that we would do well not only to finally give women more presence, but also to give them power.** What is meant is their impressive physicality, their composure in bearing children, their ability to endure pain and fear in silent perseverance or even with a smile. Their presence full of sensitivity, full of intelligence and creativity, with little clamor or vociferation. Hardly any works expressing hate can be found in this *Venice Biennale*. Instead — and this is what marks the turning point — we find more than 1,400 works by almost two hundred female artists dating back more than three hundred years, starting with the colorful, detailed plant studies of Maria Sibylla Merian from the period after 1701. Filled with and often crowned by rich "time capsules" in which Alemani presents themes and trends at a high museal level through fascinating, often unknown groups of works. The men, for example Gabriel Chaile, show huge ceramics or, in the case of Frantz Zéphirin, paintings full of living voodoo. Again and again one sees indigenous art, art brut, people of color, or encounters the oversized "Earth Space" by Delcy Morelos from Colombia. **One floats through these rooms quite enraptured. And yet: the notion of an epochal turning point sounds too aggressive for the Biennale 2022. Which is not to say that it should be called pacifist. There is too much intelligence, even wisdom, at work here to permit such a simple reduction. Let us put it better with the great, perhaps genial historian Reinhart Koselleck: We are, hopefully, at the beginning of a "saddle time" in all social and cultural domains, including art.** We are undergoing a transition, not easy for everyone, that has turned hopes into political demands, but has not yet fully implemented them; that is manifesting a political and cultural way of thinking that will make justice and diversity an ever more incontrovertible reality in the coming decades. We have no precise idea of how this will come to pass, but we need it.

DR. THOMAS KELLEIN
Head of Art Consult
thomas.kellein@bergos.ch

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