An Inquiry into the Design and Aesthetics of the
Venice Biennale Pavilions

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An Inquiry into the Design and Aesthetics of the Venice Biennale Pavilions

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Abstract: Margreiter's film Pavilion and McQueen's film Giardini exhibited respectively inside the Austrian Pavilion and the British Pavilion at the 53rd Venice Biennale of Art, question the architecture of the pavilion in general in the constructed environment of the Giardini. Is the architecture used as a container of art or the architectural form, the container itself, to be interpreted as art? Their films are about the places in which they are shot and displayed: the pavilions themselves, the containers of art, which are transformed through the films into architectural sculpture/art objects. Arguably, Margreiter's and McQueen's film reveal the extent to which the modern language of architecture of the Venice pavilions, frozen in 'space' (within the boundary of the Giardini) and 'time' (still contemporary from the date of their realization), seem to conjure that particular primordial 'timelessness' which can be valued as one of the main attributes of contemporary architecture in general. These "kaleidoscopic spaces" which are used to haunt our memory are used to stimulate the ontological role of imagination— creating a new experience of the universe via the pavilion.

Keywords: Venice Biennale Pavilion, Design, Aesthetics, Timeless Constructed Environment

I N OUR PAPER we attempt to understand whether there are characteristics, that is, certain things of value inherent within the art or architectural object that go towards creating beauty, which are the compulsory ingredients within an object for an object to be judged by us as being beautiful. What we attempt to show in our approach is that some of these ingredients might be described as something which relates to being, or having an essence, aspect or asset of 'Timelessness'.

For over a century, the pavilions in summer in Venice, Italy which draw millions of visitors from across the globe have been used as exalted contemplative areas for viewing unique and important works of art. Clearly, the pavilion for showing art provides us with a ceremonial experience which communicates the values and beliefs of the architects who designed them as well as the artists whose works are shown in them. Yet the architectural/structural elements/frameworks of these pavilions often seem to blur the boundary between art and architecture leading us to question whether the architecture of the pavilion is used as a container of art, or whether its architectural form, the container itself, should be interpreted as art?

To explore and understand this important dialectic between architecture and art, we draw on the significance of the following statement by the American urban planner and writer Kevin Lynch, who has stated that:

COMMON GROUND

Timelessness may be sought...in aesthetic contemplation.[1]

Figure 1: Steve Mc Queen, Giardini, Shot of Sverre Fehn Pavilion

Figure 2: Sverre Fehn, *Nordic CountriesPavilion*, 1962

Corroboration of Lynch's statement can be found in Steve Mc Queen's colour film *Giardini* made in 2009 for the 53rd Venice Biennale of Art and shown in the British Pavilion at the

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[1] Kevin Lynch, *What Time is This Place*, Cambridge, Massachusetts and London: The MIT Press, 1972, p. 131.

Giardini, Venice where art and architecture merge within the film successfully in terms of creating wonderful areas for aesthetic contemplation. Mc Queen's film *Giardini* would reveal that the selection of the *Giardini* in Venice as the place for the Biennale events within the time frame of more than a century continue to hold a fascinating quality of existing as a space which appears to defy time irrespective of the season or the year.[2] Mc Queen's film shows the place of the *Giardini* in winter in a dramatic sequence of images depicting a desolate landscape with no one around or exhibitions being held, and where the human presence is marginal and the real protagonist is a greyhound dog that roams around vacant empty spaces. Throughout this film, the character of the facades of the diverse pavilions, and in particular Sverre Fehn's 1962 Nordic countries pavilion, maintain a 'timeless' character, making us wonder "when" the place is. For Mc Queen, the area of the *Giardini* as a physical location for the film was for him, the only place in which nationalism and art could be seen to exist in a garden physically as parallel concepts that defy the idea of cultural and nationalistic barriers reinforced and supported through society's constructs. Yet for us Mc Queen's film especially defies the aesthetic construct of art and architecture as something existing as separate entities. Additionally, Austrian artist Dorit Margreiter's black and white film which had been shown within the 1934

Figure 3: Joseph Hoffman, Austrian Pavilion, 1934

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[2] The opening of the first Venice national Biennale in 1895 had been the result of an enthusiastic group of artists who used to exchange ideas at the Café' Florian, one of the most celebrated cultural meeting points in piazza San Marco at that time. It was only in 1980 that the Biennale of Architecture began with Paolo Portoghesi's *Architecture from the Past*. See Mulazzani, *I Padiglioni della Biennale di Venezia* 1887-1988, pp.7-14. See also: *Architecture 1980, The Presence of the Past*, Venice Biennale Catalogue, New York: Rizzoli, 1980.

Austrian Pavilion also at the 53rd Venice Biennale of Arts, titled *Pavilion* reveals a similar insight in regard to art and architecture and the 'timeless' nature of the Venice Biennale pavilions in the context of their immediate physical surroundings. The artwork that she presented filmed inside the architectural space of the Austrian Pavilion, designed by Austrian architect Joseph Hoffmann, was realised in May 2009 before the Biennale opening.
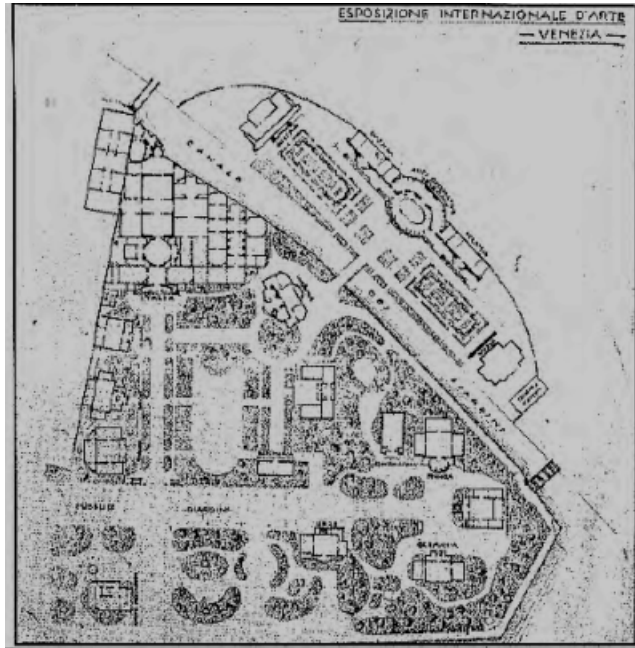

Figure 4: Giardini Della Biennale 1934 (Source: Archivio Della Biennale, Venezia-Marghera)

Generally speaking, the various architectural pavilions at the *Giardini* della Biennale in Venice all reveal the diverse directions which various individual architects had adopted during the time frame of approximately 115 years.[3] Within this period, the *Giardini* area in Venice would host the Biennale of Arts and the Biennale of Architecture inside a series of international pavilions designed within a certain period by well-known international architects. In 1922, the design of the Spanish pavilion for the *Giardini* in Venice would encourage the construction of other new innovative international pavilions including Carlo Scarpa's 1954 Venezuela Pavilion, Alvar Aalto's 1955 Finnish Pavilion, Sverre Fehn's 1962 Nordic Countries Pavilion and more recently Philip Cox's 1988 Australian Pavilion and Franco Mancuso's 2004 Korean Pavilion. In such exhibition spaces, each country's cultural values and ideals would be represented through the various architecture(s) of the pavilions.

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[3] From 1887 the neoclassical winning design of Raimondo d'Aronco for the façade of the Italian pavilion (subsequently re-designed by Guido Cirilli in 1914, Duilio Torres in 1932 and Carlo Scarpa in 1968) to the nationalistic sentiments visible in the 1934 Greek and 1938 German pavilions while strong Palladian overtones are visible in the 1909 British and 1930 American pavilions. See Marco Mulazzani, *I Padiglioni della Biennale di Venezia 1887-1988*, Venezia: Edizioni La Biennale di Venezia, 1988, Introduzione pp.7-14.

In relation to this, a question arises as to whether the aesthetics of the pavilion designed by such architects as Carlo Scarpa, Sverre Fehn, and Joseph Hoffman are of a different more inclusive 'timeless' priority because they speak about art through their architectural forms? In their films of the Venice pavilions both Margreiter and McQueen seem to be searching with their video camera for an answer to this question and to the very nature of art and its relation to architecture as seen within the exhibition space of the *Giardini* in Venice.

Historically speaking, as we have observed, in the past, the practice of designing architectural pavilions as containers for art, usually built for recurring events such as World's Fairs or other various Expos in a sense, can be seen to be part of a cyclical pattern where time itself, continues

Figure 5: Giardini Della Biennale, Nov 2010

to flow and move forward from one event to the next,—from one place, city, country, continent to the next. Yet by contrast, the pavilions of Venice—that is, for instance, as already mentioned, Scarpa's 1954 Venezuela Pavilion, Aalto's 1955 Finnish Pavilion, Fehn's 1962 Nordic Countries Pavilion, Philip Cox's 1988 Australian Pavilion and Franco Mancuso's 2004 Korean Pavilion would be purpose-built for the recurring more specific event of the Venice Biennale within the same place of the *Giardini* in Venice embodying a more static presence within the urban fabric of one specific city/place. Thus it is in these architectural

pavilions that the idea of 'timelessness' can especially be seen to arise. In the words of Kevin Lynch "...permanence is maintained as they regularly repeat themselves".[4]

In regard to this, we must now address here what we feel is the interchangeable relationship between art and architecture and how the Venice Biennale pavilions more specifically than other pavilions especially relate to this. For us, what makes art and architecture interchangeable in terms of philosophical aesthetic meaning is that both fields have the ability, when inter-related, to posses the criteria of timelessness. The idea, or aspect of timelessness, which would surround the feeling and essence of the Venice architectural pavilions can also be seen to relate to, or be defined by the idea of pavilion events occurring outside of time, which would include non-events surrounding the permanent pavilion structure which would also occur outside of time. This difficult concept can be explained via the following.

This particular idea of a relation of the pavilion to the idea of 'timelessness' is something which can also be related to the idea of a collective memory, which can also be found to be produced by the ambience of a city over time. Often pavilions within Biennale events or world Expos take place within the ambience of a beautiful city. In looking more closely at the city in relation to the architectural pavilion in this regard (through the beauty of the city) (or through the beauty of a city such as Venice) we might also say that the city itself like the architectural pavilion, contains a collective memory of its people and is like its memory—in other words, the pavilion over time, reflects, or more specifically, contributes to the memory of a city such as Venice over time. In this way, the idea of the 'timeless' pavilion can be seen to contribute to Venice as existing as a 'timeless' city.[5]

Now, what we feel links the 'timeless' aspect of the pavilion to the idea of collective memory is the idea, or our perceptions, of what we might call 'relative beauty'. In the past, the beauty of people and art, was seen to be much more involved in thinking about its appearance in relation to the object's function, and this is what they called 'relative beauty.' Due to a purpose (or purposiveness designed for a particular end in focus) which supports our mental architecture, an awareness of this, for us, during the course of our perceiving an object, such as a piece of architecture, or pavilion or artwork of some kind, would be accompanied by a feeling, which almost exists on a partial basis of perception, in relation to our orientation to the city, as a whole, and our relation to it, and within it.

For the Italian architect Aldo Rossi, many major cities for example, Rome, Athens, Paris, Cairo, Beijing, Barcelona and New York are cities constructed over time, whose inhabitants and visitors share a collective image of the places inhabited and visited. For Rossi "A City is seen as a material artefact, a man-made object built over time and retaining the traces of

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[4] Looking again at Kevin Lynch "borrowed from astronomy: events succeed one another eternally, but universal permanence is maintained as they regularly repeat themselves." Lynch, *What Time is This Place*, pp. 130-131.
[5] In fact, the *Giardini* in Venice is an area located on the eastern part of the island historically textured by orchards and gardens within early Christian churches and convents. From this original context, also portrayed in the 1500's Jacopo De Barberi's map, a Napoleonic decree in 1807 changed its nature into a *passeggiata pubblica con viali e giardini*. The decision for using the *Giardini* for a national art exhibition in 1887, transformed into the first national biennale in 1895, changed the character of Selva's master plan from a space for pleasure activities with sporadic architecture constructions, namely a stable to store carriages and horses, a bar/café, a pub and a bath house, to a space for cultural activities with substantial constructions: For example, the gardens/water bridge linking the two islands still space around them time has passed the landscape has changed trees older. In 1907 the international aspect of the Biennale began with the realization of the Belgian Pavilion. Subsequently, the German, British, French, Swedish and Russian pavilions were all realized before the advent of World War I. See Mulazzani, *I Padiglioni della Biennale di Venezia 1887-1988*, pp.7-14.

time, even if in a discontinuous way."[6] Yet for Rossi there is a second aspect to be analysed in a city which is also of interest to us, this is the 'non-tangible notion' of a city seen not only as a 'material artefact', but rather as a 'synthesis of a series of values' which Rossi names as being 'the soul of the city' which he describes as "the deepest structure of urban artefacts and thus their form, the architecture of the city"[7]—questionably, a city lives in the memory of its inhabitants who share a collective memory. Seen in this way, the distinctive and definite character of a city is its memory. Rossi's view is that 'Athens, Rome, Constantinople, and Paris all represent certain ideas of the city which would extend beyond their physical form, beyond their permanence and collective memories, which had lost their significance to give place to the void.[8] In accordance with this, for Kevin Lynch,

> Looking at cities can give a special pleasure, however commonplace the sight may be. Like a piece of architecture, the city is a construction of space, but one of vast scale, a thing perceived only in the course of long spans of time.[9]

We might again refer to Lynch, who writes of the passage of time rendered through the juxtaposition of the old and new[10] and also to Christopher Alexander who in a particular way would describe the peculiar qualities of the timelessness of buildings in the following way:

> There is one timeless way of building. It is a thousand years old, and the same today as it has always been. The great traditional buildings of the past, the villages and tents and temples in which man feels at home, have always been made by people who were very close to the center of this way. It is not possible to make great buildings beautiful places, places where you feel yourself, places where you feel alive, except by following this way. And, as you will see, this way will lead anyone who looks for it to buildings which are themselves as ancient in their form, as the trees and hills, and as our faces are.[11]

Another thing we might refer to here in discussing our idea of 'timeless' architecture is also to the idea of the ancient Greek temple—as sharing commonalities with our description and concept of the architectural pavilion for containing art as being ' timeless'. The archetypal form of the temple for this paper can be seen not as a real temple but as an idea. This can be found in the words of the architect and writer Simon Unwin who suggested that "The form of the classic Greek temple was the product of refinements made over a number of centuries, but as an idea the 'temple' is timeless—belonging equally to *the past* and the *future*.[12]

Following on from this, we therefore here must think of our idea of the 'timeless' pavilion as being something that can be seen to reflect the idea of permanence and is therefore also something which is non-event specific existing in a valid way both inside and outside of time. Kevin Lynch points out that, "...we should think of an environmental image that is, both spatial and temporal, a time-place, just as we must design settings in which the distri-

[6] Aldo Rossi, *The Architecture of the City,* Cambridge, Massachusetts and London: The MIT Press: 1982, p. 7.

[7] Rossi, ibid., p.130.

[8] Rossi, ibid., p.128.

[9] Lynch, p. 8.

[10] Lynch p. 168.

[11] Christopher Alexander, *The Timeless Way of Building*, New York: Oxford University Press, USA, 1979.

[12] Simon Unwin, *Analysing Architecture*, London and New York: Routledge, 2003, p.113.

butions of qualities in both time and are considered. Places are seen in the mind as changing or apparently static; their character and activity vary rhythmically; they connect with past and the future".[13] A further point or constituent of what may be said to comprise the essential qualities of the 'timeless' pavilion is the idea of space-event-movement. For the architect Bernard Tschumi,—architecture is passing time in space—and the definition of what architecture may be is a constant flux.[14] Seen in this way, space invades movement—while movement invades space. This may also correlate to what was said before—that is, the feeling of Timelessness that would surround the feeling/essence of the architectural pavilion can be defined by pavilion events occurring outside of time which includes non-events surrounding the permanent pavilion structure which also occur outside of time.
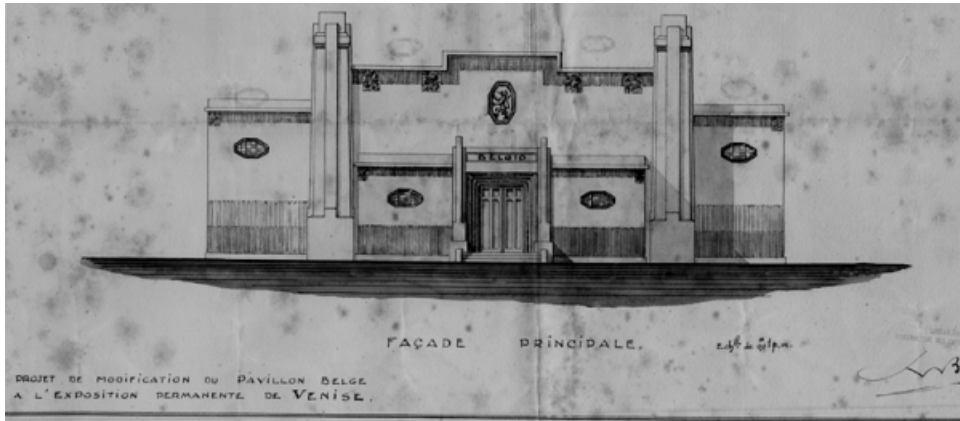

Figure 6: Belgian Pavilion, 1907 (Source: Archivio Della Biennale)

Like both Mc Queen's film *Giardini,* and Margreiter's film installation *Pavilion* this idea of how architecture can be used to reflect the idea of timelessness can also be seen in the tetraology of films made by modernist Italian film director Michelangelo Antonioni (that is, *l' avventura*, *la notte*, *l' eclisse and il deserto rosso*) in the 1960s as well as in French New Wave film director Jean Luc Godard's film *le mepris*. In Antonioni's films the idea of modernist architecture is critiqued via a celebration of more permanent—'timeless'—traditional architectural forms. Similarly, in Godard's *le mepris* the idea of timelessness is aligned with ancient architectural forms.

Returning to the *Giardini* of the Biennale in Venice, the first international 1907 Belgian pavilion and its subsequent additions is a good example where art and architecture seem to be working together. This pavilion had been the result of a close relationship between the architect, the artists and the craftsmen all involved in the design of an articulated interior architectural space where a sequence of rooms (called *enfilade*) are enriched by paintings, bas-reliefs and sculptures.

Arguably, there had been a different attitude and a radical change in the exhibition practices from the modernist architectural approach of Joseph Hoffman's 1934 beautiful and contemplative Austrian pavilion to the more elaborated juxtaposition of spaces in Carlo Scarpa's

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[13] Lynch, p. 242.
[14] Bernard Tschumi, *Architecture and Disjunction*, The MIT Press, 1996.

1956 Venezuela pavilion. Hoffman's external volume and mass would offer to the visitor a suffused and filtered light which enhances the interior atmosphere resulting from white surfaces in dialogue with a canvas on the ceiling (called *velario*) which filters the light from the windows above illuminating the artwork on white bare walls with a floating effect. Hoffman's dematerialized white box with a central entrance gallery which leads to the courtyard in the back is underlined by the narrow, concrete roof slab, the vertical repetition of the windows underneath and the modulated concrete façade.

Figure 7: Carlo Scarpa, Venezuela Pavilion 1954

However, in contrast to Hoffman's pavilion, although also extremely beautiful and contemplative, Scarpa's design does not produce a white symmetrical box for the artwork to be exhibited, but rather an interlocking series of spaces and walkways at different heights conceived through diverse materials with extreme attention to the flexibility of the architectural spaces, the details of the edges conditions, and a strong volumetric presence that stands up against the Swiss and Russian pavilions in close proximity. If on the one hand Hoffman's and Scarpa's pavilions offer a diverse approach to the way the artwork is exhibited which creates a particular dialogue with the architectural space, on the other, both pavilions seem to equally stand up to time offering a timelessness condition to their architecture conceived respectively almost 80 and 60 years earlier.

Figure 8: Carlo Scarpa, Venezuela Pavilion 1954

Evidence of this is to be found in the idea of the temple as expressed earlier. In a similar way to the archetypal temple, the pavilion can be said to achieve a timeless feeling— belonging equally to *the past* and the *future* — with its own ideal system of proportions through its search for harmony with the surrounding environment and equally its attempts to impose a geometric order while standing on the ground.

Also in looking more closely at Scarpa's pavilion at the *Giardini* in Venice, we find that its beauty, suggests to us, an experience, of what pleasure is. For us, the question that we also may need to ask here, is, what kind of pleasure, is the pleasure we experience of beauty? Perhaps this can be answered if we were to also ask the following question—is beauty something that is subjective or objective? In the past, an important view, was that the idea of beauty had included the idea of our pleasurable responses which had been conjured up by a beautiful object, such as a beautiful architectural work, coupled with our recognition, that our pleasurable responses to beauty, can also derive from a belief in the objective characteristics of the beautiful object. However, one might also say, that we do not perceive beauty in an object unless we, can find pleasure, in perceiving it. Perhaps by thinking more philosophically about aesthetics and art and architecture together through Scarpa's design, can perhaps help us to increase our understanding of what beauty might be, and what taste might be and how important beauty and good taste is when understanding good architecture.

Figure 9: Sverre Fehn Nordic Countries Pavilion 1962

Sverre Fehn's 1962 Nordic countries pavilion seen through the film maker Steve McQueen's eyes during the desolate winter time charges architecture with a more profound meaning revealing its content probably more in depth than during the event of the biennale itself which takes place during the summer months. In McQueen's film, the camera uses the architecture of the pavilions to engage visitors in a journey through time and space questioning, playing and caressing the volumes and the spaces in winter time when there isn't the rich green of the tree canopies of the *Giardini* and the various artworks on display. The key idea in Sverre Fehn's pavilion is the solution for the 'floating roof' (*copertura lievitante*), which has been realized through the superimposition of two layers of concrete beams in a grid. This dense repetition of the roof frame is used to maximize the quality of natural light inside the pavilion. As part of the roof frame, Sverre Fehn used laminated plastic channels reinforced with fibreglass hanging from the upper frame creating a suffused quality of light throughout the pavilion's interior. Therefore the aim had been to create a flexible interior using a series of display panels that can be hooked to the roof structure. As a result, the interior space is placed into a dialogue with the exterior and the immediate surrounds that allows the trees to be part of the overall composition.

Returning to Margreiter's film installation *Pavilion*, she decided to produce her artwork not in her Austrian studio but instead in Venice filming her film installation within the architectural space of the Austrian Pavilion itself, the container of art, which is transformed through the film into a sculptural art object. In Margreiter's film installation the pavilion is meticulously examined through a constant dialogue between the architecture and the camera

transforming the pavilion as it becomes a permanent fixture into places of temporal and spatial memory which creates a strong sense of timelessness. The black and white shots in the film reinforce this sense of timelessness. Art seems here to be adopting the ideas of architecture as a way to question the very nature of art and its relation with the exhibition space. The film forcefully expresses the profound and complex interior atmosphere of its horizontal and vertical bare white surfaces of floors, walls and ceiling to create rooms or better spaces experienced in movement following the play of natural and artificial lights which create dark and light sections within the pavilion through unexpected point of views. (Some of these artists reveal the essence of the architecture of the pavilions within the space of the *Giardini* during the time they are not used as exhibition places.)

As in Margreiter's example, Steve McQueen's film also questions the thin edge between art and architecture. McQueen's camera uses the architecture of the pavilions to engage the visitors in a journey through time and space questioning, playing and almost caressing the architectural volumes and spaces during the desolate winter time, when the absence of the rich green of the tree canopies of the *Giardini* and the artwork on display seems almost paradoxically to visibly stress this quality of timelessness of the Venezia Pavilions. This makes us wonder what does the architecture of the pavilions offer to the visitor where there are no events? For the ancient Chinese philosopher and sage Lao Tzu the answer to this is the very essence of architecture. In his words "…the reality of the building consists not in the four walls and the roof…but in the space within" expressed in his Tao Te Ching's writings which defined space as 'the invisible container of the infinite'. [15] What lessons can we learn from Lao Tzu's definition of space? Arguably, the interior spaces of the pavilions as 'invisible containers of the infinite' merge with the 'exterior spaces within' the pavilions in the landscape of the *Giardini* achieving Kevin Lynch's proposition—"Timelessness may be sought…in aesthetic contemplation" as quoted in the introduction to his paper and for us both statements represent the essence behind the Venezia Pavilions of the *Giardini*.

Notes

Unless stated: photos by Paola Favaro

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Dr Cyrus Manasseh is an experienced Sydney-based writer, musician and academic, and is author of the book The Problematic of Video Art in the Museum 1968-1990 (2009). He holds a PhD from the University of Western Australia in art and philosophy and is a specialist in art, architecture, film history and critical theory. He has published numerous articles and essays on aesthetics, film, video and museology and has presented his research on film, video and spatial aesthetics in international forums in Venice, Prague, Sydney, Beijing and at Harvard University. Dr. Manasseh Lectures in the School of Design at the University of Technology, Sydney, Australia. His publications include 'The Art Museum in the 19th Century: J. J. Winckelmann's Influence on the Establishing of the Classical Paradigm of the

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[15] Lao Tzu, *Tao Te Ching*, original text written in 6th century BC fundamental to the Taoist School, translation of the starting new documents found at Guodian by Robert G.Henricks, New York: Columbia University Press, 2000.

Art Museum', 'Changing Museum Environments: Global Articulations of the Video Text [1968-1990]', 'The Cairo Museum, the National Museum of Athens, the Ancient Iran Museum and the Louvre: Curatorial Practices from East to West and Back', 'Connecting disciplines and tracing an educated imagination', Art, Language & Machines: the Interrelationship between Marcel Duchamp, Francis Picabia & Raymond Roussel (under Roussel's spell)', Art without the aesthetic?: Defining conceptual & post-conceptual practices', 'From Passive White Cube Viewer to Active Black Cube User: Tracking Changes in Museum Environments via Installation Art', 'Playgrounds of Disturbance: Bruce Nauman's "Existentialism" in a Modernist Gallery Space & the Problems of Analogue Video Art in the Gallery'.

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