

## **The Brand-wagon: Emerging art markets and the Venice Biennale.**

### **Introduction and Literature Review**

#### **Branding Culture**

“Where any view of money exists, art cannot be carried on.” William Blake (1757-1827).

Two hundred years after Blake’s pronouncement, talking about art and money in the same context is no longer taboo (Hughes, 1984). Painting for profit is accepted, and even allegedly not-for-profit events such as art biennales (large scale art expositions) are strongly linked to money and commerce, as well as to elements of marketing and branding. Thompson’s comprehensive and refreshing study of branding and culture within contemporary art (2008) shows how branded auctions, branded dealers and branded collectors’ provenance can boost an artwork’s tangible worth, as well as the artist’s reputation. In terms of commodities – goods and services – branded products are distinguished from their competitors by a symbol (logo, trademark or package) that “acts as a credible guarantee” for the consumer (Ghodeswar, 2008, p. 4). Similarly, branded art professionals and institutions confer a guarantee on artworks, giving consumers a sense of security and sustainability in a market that is constantly in flux.

In a world saturated with competing products and services, where noisy and often conflicting messages make choice overwhelming for many consumers, brand theory explains that differentiation and the creation of an identity are key to standing out from the crowd. Brands act as “signposts in the busy marketplace” and organise particular meanings and values in neat, accessible and attractive packages that consumers purchase and relate to on a personal level (Braun, 2004, p. 20). The emotional involvement essential to successful branding can be traced back to the 18<sup>th</sup> century European Romantic movement, which endowed non-human objects with pseudo-human sentiments (anthropomorphism), enabling emotional interaction between man and object (Twitchell, 2005). Confirming this essential relationship, Chong explains “Branding has been described as a form of corporate storytelling with a tendency towards anthropomorphism: that is, brands like people have personalities” (Chong, 2008, p. 120). Today, brand managers behave like “symbolic experts” and use this kind of emotional projection to create stories, which instil meaning into products, transforming commodities into concepts and lifestyles that the consumer desires to purchase (Salzer-Moerling and Strannegard, 2004). Much like brand managers, art professionals (artists, curators, gallery owners, dealers and critics) also create storylines, particularly for modern and contemporary art, where the discourse, rather than the product itself, infuses meaning into the work and legitimises it within its field. At the same time, Fillis (2009) argues that brand managers as tastemakers should actively create a market for their product or service, as artists do for their own work. Modern artists as innovators generally create acceptance for each of their new works rather than basing their production on pre-existing customer demand. Drummond’s five-phase model (2006) illustrates how a new market can be created even for Old Masters, where the initial creative acts occurred centuries ago. Fillis (2002) encourages marketers to “explore creativity” and question marketing theories and practices dating from the 1950s, following the example of artists and art critics who constantly reject traditional movements and establish new artistic trends. Developing his

core argument, Fillis (2004) discourages arts organisations from adopting worn out marketing techniques and emphatically recommends a more entrepreneurial approach. Schroeder and Salzer-Moerling (2006) rationalise the need for adding a cultural dimension to branding and describe “Brand Culture” as a cultural, historical and political basis for understanding brands in their context. Ind (2006) recommends that branding adopt a multi-faceted, Cubist approach to convey the essence of the object rather than a single-plane view.

In today’s competitive market, brands aim to communicate what the product stands for rather than merely what it is, attempting to transfer this identity to the consumer. Creating this identity for the product determines corporate or individual strategy and the ultimate value of the brand (Aacker and Joachimsthaler, 2000). In the art context, identity and not necessarily product quality, will play a vital role in the successful branding of culture.

Originating from the Latin word to cultivate, culture is an organic term, which now includes national culture, subculture, organisational culture, corporate culture, cross-culture, intercultural management and brand culture, amongst others. At the root of any of these modern terms lies the meaning that culture is first of all a social phenomenon, where values, symbols and behaviour are shared among the members of a group; and, secondly, that it is a learned phenomenon, meaning that new types of culture can be acquired through socialisation (Morrison, 2009). Dinnie (2008) observes that successful nation branding requires an investment in the country’s cultural expression, which can be categorised into heritage, landscape and the arts. For the purposes of this paper, the focus will be on the arts, in particular the visual arts and conceptual art.

One of the most influential sociologists of our era, Pierre Bourdieu, sees culture as a source of domination and takes the Marxist view that ‘cultural practices function to legitimate and perpetuate class inequality’ (Swartz, 1997, p. 40). Bourdieu views culture, social structure and action as “symbolic power” (Swartz, 1997, p. 6), which can only be attained via legitimisation and is reserved for the social, educational and wealthy elite. Bangkok conceptual artist Michael Shaowanasai agrees with Bourdieu that, in Shaowanasai’s words, “art is a big weapon, it’s a tool with no sharp edge that can be absorbed into the minds of people.” Venezuelan contemporary artist Bernardita Rakos observes how the international participants at the Venice Biennale reflect “culture as a form of power.” For Shaowanasai, the term culture is all-pervasive – art establishments in Thailand (where art is largely seen as a rich man’s hobby) have strategically included the term *culture* into their names: Bangkok Art and Culture Centre and the government’s Office of Contemporary Art and Culture (within the Ministry of Culture) are but two examples. Schroeder (2005) observes close ties between branding and expressions of culture, arguing that art is a visual medium, as are logos and symbols, and that artists promote their product, rather as brand managers do within a corporation. Moody observes that contemporary artists in particular are “drawn deeper into marketing rather than [into] making” (2005, p.77). Aspden, too, reflects on how today’s wealthiest and most successful artists “exploit the spheres of marketing, branding, publicity and celebrity to add allure to their work” (Aspden 2009, p. 11). Clearly, art can be a tool to create wealth for artists, dealers, collectors, and investors and, on a wider plane, contribute to tourism and cultural development (Schroeder, 2005).

## **Methodology**

Qualitative research was conducted on site at the 53<sup>rd</sup> Venice Biennale over a period of four days, from 4<sup>th</sup> to 7<sup>th</sup> June 2009. Of this time, approximately twenty hours were

devoted to observation of the Biennale area in general as a basis for specific observation of selected sites and exhibits. Observation of art-market leader exhibits revealed a trend of devoting each nation's pavilion to one single artist (e.g., Britain, Japan, USA, Germany and Spain). This information serves to compare and contrast with in-depth information gathered at the group-exhibit Thai and Venezuelan pavilions, which, being emerging art-market nations, are the focus of this study.

A subjectivist research with qualitative data collection methods was best suited since it allowed for concepts to evolve during the research process, rather than formulating fixed hypotheses at the start (Crotty, 1998; Kvale, 2007). Observation at the Thai and Venezuelan pavilions was participant, in that the researcher interacted with the exhibitors, who had been made aware of the purpose of the researcher's presence. Observation remained non-participant in that the researcher did not identify or integrate with the group, thus retaining her objectivity as far as possible.

After obtaining written consent, semi-structured interviews were conducted and digitally recorded with participants of the Venezuelan and Thai Pavilions. The total time spent at the Thai pavilion was approximately seven hours with about five hours at the Venezuelan pavilion. At the Venezuelan pavilion, interviews were conducted with the pavilion curator, Maria Luz Cárdenas, and two of the four artists, Daniel Medina and Bernardita Rakos, both of whom represent the younger generation of Venezuelan artists. For the Thai Pavilion, four interviews were carried out: with the pavilion curator, Thavorn Ko Udomvit, as well as three of the five participating artists, including established conceptual artist and catalogue editor, Michael Shaowanasai, and two upcoming conceptual artists, Sudsiri Pui Ok and Wantanee Siripattananuntakul (please see Appendix II for both pavilion hierarchies and for brief artist biographies). Full written transcripts of all interviews were submitted to each participant for their review.

Drawing on the literature reviewed above, semi-structured interviews at each pavilion evolved around a framework of questions that included the topics listed below:

- Selection procedures for organizers, curators and artists.
- Funding, logistics, and support and media coverage in the home country.
- Participants' appreciation of the Venice Biennale as a commercial/non-commercial event.
- Participants' appreciation of the value or benefit for themselves personally and/or professionally of attending the Venice Biennale, as compared to the value or benefit reaped by their countries as exhibiting nations.
- Participants' appreciation of the Venice Biennale as a branded event and the automatic (or not) seal of approval that attending this event can confer.

The average interview time was around 55 minutes; interviews with the Thai participants were conducted in English, and in Spanish with the Venezuelans. Interviews were digitally recorded and later transcribed. Transcripts were then manually coded with recurring themes including: process of participation, support of the arts in the home country, benefits (for artists and national Pavilions) of attending branded events such as the Venice Biennale, and, most importantly, the issue of identity and signature artistic style.

From this research, the importance of identity emerged as a key factor in the successful promotion and branding of individual artists and enhancing the cultural positioning of participating nations.

## **Findings and Analysis**

### **Branded Biennales**

The Italian word *biennale* means every other year. Since its 1895 inauguration, the Venice Biennale has set a trend for large-scale events that play a vital cultural and financial role in the art world, while also benefitting their host cities. A worldwide explosion of art biennales in the past 20 years has seen growth of the phenomenon from the original Venice Biennale, perhaps the “grand-daddy of art fests” (Adam, 2009, p. 1) to a total of 60 in over 30 countries. The Sao Paulo Biennale (Brazil), founded in 1951, Documenta (Kassel, Germany), dating from 1955 and exhibiting every 5 years, and the Kwangju Biennale in South Korea number among long-standing events yet to reach Venice’s status. The fact that nearly a dozen other biennales have failed proves that branding and sustainability within the art world are difficult goals.

Artists as brand managers (Schroeder, 2005) need to participate in high-profile biennales, such as the Venice Biennale, to legitimise their work and gain symbolic power (Swartz, 1997). Simply attending such an event is regarded within the industry as conferring a ‘seal of approval’ on an artist’s work, branding it for future success, an example being Takashi Murakami, whose work featured at the TransCulture, 46<sup>th</sup> Venice Biennale in 1995, after which he was exhibited in Australia, Austria, France and the USA, as well as his native Japan. In Murakami’s case, brand equity was assured by his Venice Biennale presence and his trajectory continued into a corporate association with Louis Vuitton and museum retrospectives and permanent exhibition at the Los Angeles MOCA and the MoMA in New York (Thornton, 2009). Biennales lie within the workings of the global art machine and, on opening night, the world’s leading curators, museum directors, gallery owners, private and corporate collectors, art critics and journalists gather to view what is fashionable in the contemporary art world. Commentators refer to the Venice Biennale as the Olympics of contemporary art, since the event aims to promote new artistic trends from around the globe and in theory should be “unsullied by commerce” (Adam, 2009, p. 1). And yet, fewer nations are represented at the Biennale than at the Olympics. Only 77 participating nations attended in 2009, which seems to indicate that this event is still reserved for countries with cultural and financial power.

The Venice Biennale offers artists various modes of participation. The most prestigious level is by invitation from the Biennale committee to individuals to participate and compete with other artists at the *Palazzo* (palace) within the *Giardini* grounds. Artists may otherwise be selected to represent their nation either at a permanent pavilion within the *Giardini* (national pavilions appeared as early as 1907 and today reflect a power play amongst nations), at the *Arsenale* or at temporary venues dotted around the city centre. Collateral events may also be staged independently by individual artists or groups. The Biennale Committee awards prizes to the best pavilions and artists at the start of the event. The Gold and Silver Lions (the city’s symbol) represent an unmatched seal of excellence within the art world.

### **To Biennale or not to Biennale?**

Bureaucracy, budget restrictions, careful planning, logistics, time and effort are all exhaustively invested into participating at the Venice Biennale. Where an immediate return on this investment is by no means guaranteed, what does the artist or nation stand to gain?. Arayan Rajadumnersadouk (a possible pseudonym for Michael Shaowanasai) writes in the catalogue of the Thai Pavilion that the Biennale is the “biggest showdown in contemporary arts [...] all the big shots flock to the sinking city on the Adriatic” (Shaowanasai, 2009, p. 54). This could translate into essential exposure for artist and nation. Going further, Maria Luz Cárdenas, curator of the Venezuelan Pavilion and current director of the Caracas Museum of Contemporary Art, criticises the “supermarket” feeling of the event; however, she also acknowledges that participating at Venice is “fundamental for artists” because it is “like the cathedral of biennales.” In Cárdenas’ view, representing younger artists at this Mecca of culture benefits a nation twofold: it shows a fresher side of the country’s contemporary art scene, and “opens the artists’ doors to other levels of participation.” Current Biennale director, Daniel Birnbaum, takes a more holistic approach, seeing the event not as a platform to launch fashionable artists but rather to “look at where artists are going and ... where the world is going” (Birnbaum and Volz, 2009). Be they established, upcoming, exhibiting individually or members of a group collective, the artists’ purpose in participating at the Biennale is always to win. Cárdenas explains that artists achieve exceptional “promotion, dissemination and value [of the work], especially in the case of young artists, since this is a maturing experience and a sort of graduation ceremony.” This reaffirms Bourdieu’s view that all “cultural production... is reward orientated” and guided by a desire for real or symbolic profit or advantage (Swartz, 1997, p. 69). Although participation at any international biennale would add symbolic (if not monetary) value to an artist’s work, the Venice Biennale attracts the wealthiest and most influential members of the art world.

### **Areas of Branding**

**Branding for Artists:** Participation at the Biennale may open numerous doors and be immensely beneficial for an artist’s reputation, curriculum and network of contacts, as well as benefiting the artist financially. The 50<sup>th</sup> Venice Art Biennale director, Francesco Bonami, admits that “the market has always been part of the art system” (Adam, 2009, p. 2) and the Biennale is no exception. All the pieces of the British pavilion’s Tracey Emin show had been sold out before the 2007 edition of the Venice Biennale even opened to the public. Although pavilions are by national participation and are predominantly government funded, private dealers compete to get their artists into the branded event to boost their value and sales (Adam, 2009). At the same time, many younger artists have to wait and see what the fruits of the Biennale might be once the party is over. On a personal level, the Biennale helps artists to “emerge from the province [of their own nation], reinforce their discourse and places a golden star next to their name” (Daniel Medina, Venezuelan contemporary artist). Most artists feel a sense of personal satisfaction and relish the opportunity to speak to various members of the art world. For Venezuelan contemporary artist Bernardita Rakos, “it is an evolution for artists.” Without a doubt, every artist wants to be seen, and participating at the Biennale “lifts their profile, regardless of the quality of the work on display” (Sudsiri Pui Ok, Thai conceptual artist). In the global market, Biennales are *visas* than grant access to other worlds (Wantanee Siripattananuntakul, Thai conceptual artist). However, some artists feel that they are too young and inexperienced, so that the Biennale is a missed opportunity to show their true worth, or are disillusioned by the commercial and political nature of the event (Pui Ok and Siripattananuntakul).

An artist may automatically be stamped as participating in the Biennale, but the sustainable value of the branded event will depend on various factors. Previous Venice Biennale director, Bonami, maintains that quality is key: “there’s an illusion that the Biennale can help an artist’s career but it all comes down to the quality of the work” (Adam, 2009, p. 2); he admits that mediocre artists will simply sink into “oblivion” after the show finishes. Not only quality but an *individualised* quality is key. The brand image of the Biennale, with the story or discourse that it implies, should characterise the individualised artist in the mind of the consumer, distinguishing this particular artist from the rest. Today, a branded artist’s success relies on the balance of “his statement, the commodification [of his work] and the compliance of his audience” (Aspden, 2009, p. 11). Identity is thus crucial to branding artists and their work. Where individual identity does not emerge as a result of the branding process, attending a branded Biennale will not automatically work its intended magic. Thai artist Siripattananuntakul regrets her identity being lost within the group project, whereas Pui Ok is more inclined to accept the fact that “I am not come as me, I come as the Thai pavilion”, that is, that her individual discourse yields to the common voice of the group’s statement.

**Branding for the Country:** Wealthy nations regularly finance their Biennale appearances, but how can an emerging economy justify exhibiting its artists abroad at such allegedly not-for-profit events? Venezuelan artist Daniel Medina declares that the express association of the country of origin with an artist’s name inevitably enhances that nation’s cultural positioning. The Biennale’s largest pavilions and parties are hosted by European nations, North America and some of the BRIC economies, notably Russia and China, these being nations with supreme cultural and financial capital. Participation by African nations is negligible, with only 2 North African pavilions (Egypt and Morocco) and sub-Saharan representation from the Republic of Gabon and the Union of the Comoros in the Indian Ocean. Nations with restricted budgets opt for group exhibitions such as IILA, *Istituto Italo Latino Americano*, representing artists from Bolivia, Colombia, Costa Rica, Cuba, Ecuador, El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, Peru and the Dominican Republic that have some Italian link or heritage; and the Central Asian Pavilion for Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan. These group exhibits, where artists are represented as individuals within a shared space, prove less beneficial for the participating nations, since their cultural position and current art scene is often blurred with that of their neighbours. Beyond national borders, some nations make surprising partnerships, such as the Iceland and Singapore shared pavilion in Venice’s city centre.

Instead of using the Biennale branding opportunity to highlight their individual artists or current art trends, some exhibitors focus on their national cultural projects, as illustrated by the debut appearance of the United Arab Emirates in the *Arsenale*, where video interviews and architectural models for Abu Dhabi’s planned Cultural Foundation drown out the photographic display of young Emirati artist, Lamyia Gargash. The multi-million dollar UAE project envisages a “cultural asset for the world”, including Guggenheim and Louvre branded museums, a performing arts centre, a national local history museum, a Maritime Museum and a Biennale Park housing 19 pavilions. UAE are not the first to try to create a cultural hub out of thin air, and the Guggenheim Foundation makes a profit from selling its brand name to those willing to pay (Rectanus, 2002). However, this kind of cultural centre requires an educated staff and public as well as an attractive physical space. As Robertson remarks, countries should “beware the consequences of building museums and galleries before deciding on their content” (Robertson, 2005, p. 156)

National pavilions at the Venice Biennale can also serve to display an accurate representation of the country and its art scene. According to Venezuelan artist Bernardita Rakos, “everything becomes a political debate and society is polarised ... they [the press] turn everything into something political”. In contrast, the pavilion’s curator emphasises that the Venezuelan participants were selected not because of their political inclinations, but rather on their artistic merits and their suitability for the Biennale’s theme of *Making Worlds*. The project received no national media support before or during the Biennale, which may hinder the artists’ development in the local art market upon their return home. Despite this, visitors to the Venezuelan pavilion seemed pleasantly surprised to find that preconceptions of a nation fragmented both politically and socially are proven wrong, at least on a cultural level.

The Venice Biennale can give participating nations stature and security, and the Venezuelan representation in 2009 seemed to feel that they benefitted individually and nationally from participating. By contrast, Siripattananuntakul, representing the Thai pavilion, feels that competing against the market leaders (both financially and culturally) simply belittles the emerging country’s artists, so that participating in smaller scale events might prove more beneficial and cost effective to the nation, and to the artists.

**Branding for the City:** Thornton stresses that: “A biennial ... is a goliath exhibition that is meant to capture the global artistic moment ... a true biennial is international in outlook and hosted by a city rather than a museum” (Thornton, 2009, p. 225). The Venice Biennale must cooperate with various levels of local and regional councils (such as the Comune di Venezia, Provincia di Venezia and the Regione del Veneto) and strategically avoids interfering with Venice’s year-round tourism. The two permanent venues, the *Giardini* (including the exhibition *Palazzo*) and the *Arsenale*, located near Venice’s main attractions at the *Piazza San Marco*, have their own *vaporetto* (water taxi) stations. Collateral events and rented national pavilions are the latest, most lucrative venues for the Biennale organisers. Countries without permanent pavilions are offered temporary spaces dotted around the city centre, and smaller islands at a price to suit every budget: from grand palaces and basilicas to small shop fronts. The Biennale organisers hire out dilapidated buildings to be occupied and maintained for the duration of the event only. Mr Shaowanasai comments on the organisers’ shrewd business sense and close collaboration with the city:

if we found an abandoned church or space and we [the Thai pavilion] decided to work on it, renovate it with our own funding they will let us live there – use the space for 10 years – which is a really smart way [of making money] because this is crumbling town ...if you look really hard it is falling apart.

Venice hosts the most visited Biennale worldwide, which benefits the city, local businesses and the Biennale’s official sponsors, which include *Enel*, *Nivea*, *Illy*, *Foscarini*, *Artek* and more. Taking together its film, drama, dance, and architecture events, the Venice Biennale brings the city a substantial amount of revenue in tourism and hospitality.

To sum up, the sinking city of Venice clearly benefits from the bi-annual event, and, if managed correctly, individual artists can profit both financially and symbolically. For the participating countries, however, especially emerging markets with limited funds available for culture, participating at the Biennale can be a risky business.

## **Location, location, location**

**Venezuelan Pavilion:** designed and built for Venezuela by acclaimed Venetian architect, Carlo Scarpa (1906-1978) in 1956, the Venezuelan pavilion is well placed within the Biennale's *Giardini*. The pavilion has the unique yet awkward feature of being both part of Italian heritage and Venezuelan property: Scarpa's small yet cutting edge design is a listed building under Italian law and one of Venice's proud heritage sites. The Venezuelan government must maintain the building under strict conditions set by Italian law, however, and much of their Biennale budget for 2009 was spent on waterproofing and damp control. Accordingly, as Cárdenas points out, where other nations are free to enhance their pavilion for the Biennale (with paint, tents, installations, plants and decorative and structural changes), the Venezuelan participants face tight restrictions and high maintenance costs.

Despite costly upkeep and building restrictions, the Venezuelan's permanent position at the heart of the Biennale offers its artists exposure as well as giving the country a reputation of having certain cultural clout. With only 2 other South American neighbours within the *Giardini* (Brazil and Uruguay), the Venezuelan pavilion is popular with Biennale visitors. This exposure can have negative side effects if the exhibit is poorly managed or if the nation does not participate at all. This happened during the 2003 50<sup>th</sup> Venice Biennale, when national ribbons and a blackened flag were the only items on display. Political and social upheavals in Venezuela had culminated in a general strike towards the end of 2002. Tension and emotions ran high. Two artists, Javier Téllez and Pedro Morales had been selected to represent Venezuela at the 2003 Biennale, but Téllez sent his official resignation in February 2003, explaining that, considering the current critical situation of the country, the only artwork that could be presented was absence itself. Nevertheless, Morales was still scheduled to represent the torn nation when his work was called into question as being unpatriotic and anti-government. His planned display was felt to jeopardise Venezuela's cultural positioning and international reputation, giving the art world the impression that the country is in rapid financial, political and cultural decline. The stand-off resulted in Venezuela's black-flag non-exhibit for 2003 (Universes in Universe, 2003).

**Thai Pavilion:** Unlike Venezuela, Thailand does not have a permanent pavilion and has been hiring temporary venues since its debut show in 2003. Made possible by influential Thai conceptual artist Rirkrit Tiravanija (Pettifor, 2003), Thailand's first participation at the Biennale coincided with Tiravanija's role as co-curator of the 2003 50<sup>th</sup> edition of the international event.

Thailand was the only South East Asian country with its own rented pavilion at the 2009 Biennale (Singapore shared a pavilion with Iceland). Battling with budget restrictions and overspending, the Thai team set up their exhibit in an unprepossessing shop front located near Venice's main train station in *Santa Croce*. The Thai artists made the most of their proposed location. Shaowanasai explains how their particular proposal was chosen to represent their country:

We are not in a Palazzo or a basilica, we are located in a busy business area, so we come up with an idea – we cater to the people that walk around here, the locals, we are not catering to the Prada-wearing big shots – people come in here and mistake us for a restaurant, a travel agency. We are not standing out – we are going down as much as possible so people walk past us and say “where's the pavilion?”

Although the Thai artists feel that their play on art and consumption was a success, the Thai pavilion endured a soul shattering setback: the courier company shipped the entire exhibit three weeks behind schedule. The planned display could not be set up until after the Biennale's vital opening events, when the festival is busiest and the art market leaders attend the show.

Adding an unflattering location to this logistical disaster, it is not hard to imagine that the Venice Biennale branding magic might not work to best effect for the 2009 Thai Pavilion. Taking into account the arguments outlined below, it becomes clear that branding for success at the Venice Biennale is not an automatic process.

### **Climbing on to the brand-wagon**

In marketing, Aaker and Joachimstaler (2000) establish that identity lies at the core of leadership, and that a brand's essence is the "glue" that holds together all the elements (brand as product, organisation, person and symbol) that go towards a successful marketing initiative (2000, pp. 44-45). Equally, in the art world, leadership is pursued by artists and the Venice Biennale becomes the ideal setting for a cultural battle of the brands. If a nation's brand equity is made up of innate, vicarious, disseminated and nurtured assets, the last of which includes support for the arts (Dinnie, 2008, p. 68), then representing the nation's artists at branded biennales, such as the Venice Biennale, is a key way to validate the country's cultural positioning and financial power on a global level.

The cultural strategy adopted by the Venezuelan Pavilion at the 2009 Biennale was to work with a general concept (*Worlds in Process*), which reflected the overall theme of *Making Worlds*, whilst allowing each artist's style to emerge. Maria Luz Cárdenas, curator of the Venezuelan Pavilion, explains how young and established artists' styles were linked by shared themes (territorial, social and intimate worlds), without prejudicing each artist's discourse. Bernardita Rakos was free to replicate her signature style of silhouetted interiors in the small pavilion, and was told to do "whatever she wanted", whilst Daniel Medina, who had been selected for his studies of territorial space and cartography, was able to bring a new collection of digital images juxtaposing his native city's slums with Greek temples. The organisers of the Venezuelan cohort went out of their way to ensure ideal exposure of their artists' signature work. Magdalena Fernandez' video and sound installation, *Ara ararauna*, required a darkened room, which had to be carefully annexed to the bright, open-plan pavilion without causing any damage or changes to this Italian heritage site. Curators and artists were satisfied with the end result and believe that amidst the "overdose" of artworks at the Biennale, showcasing the artists' signature style reinforces their discourse and personal growth, and also highlights the nation's cultural identity.

Any strategy will be somehow determined by cultural conditioning. Asians and Westerners are culturally conditioned to think differently: many East Asian nations, influenced by the teachings of Confucius (551-479 BC), adhere to "collective agency", where a harmonious and successful life depends on belonging to a collective or group, e.g. nation, family or company. In contrast, most Western societies are more individualistic (Nisbett, 2003; Ferraro, 2006). True Asians, the Thai pavilion adopted a collective strategy for the Biennale. Their aim was to "question the beauty and substance of *Thai-ness* as an image that has been created for global consumption" (Phataranawik, 2009). The issues of globalisation and collective existential angst have previously featured in the work of many Thai conceptual

artists including Thai artist and international curator, Rikrit Tiravanija. Simulating a travel agency, the Thai pavilion included fake dating websites, a misleading catalogue, manipulated maps of Bangkok, bogus news presenters and television commercials and a pseudo tourism video, all presented in an enticing and playful manner, like “candy for the public” (Pui Ok). The individual identity of each artist is nowhere to be found. Siripattananuntakul explains her disenchantment with the Biennale, since she, as an artist, would like to “tell [her] idea but in a group you cannot tell. Sometimes you have to share but how can you share it?” Pui Ok is more optimistic about the theme solely devised by Shaowanasai and Sakarin Krue On, both previous exhibitors at the Biennale and established artists in Thailand. Although she enjoyed the joint creation process, she recognises that she was not participating as herself, but as the Thai pavilion. The Thai catalogue itself criticises the Asian way of working as a team, where “elders lead the way for the young ... but when are [the elders] going to learn to let go ... and [let the young] walk on their own feet?” (Shaowanasai, 2009, p. 54).

### **Summary**

There remains little doubt that branding helps artists attain fame and fortune. The Venice Biennale is a cultural event that has already effectively branded itself as preeminent. Exhibiting artists, however, will only be efficiently sealed for success by attending the Biennale if their own individual identity is strongly enhanced over and above the identity of the group or nation that accompanies them. Contrasting the experiences of artists from the emerging economies of Thailand and Venezuela proves that Biennale branding is not automatic and occurs only when artistic individualities are able to emerge. Individual identity lies at the heart of the Venezuelan Pavilion, where each artist (both established and upcoming) was encouraged to showcase his or her signature style within the overall theme of the Biennale and the nation’s Pavilion. On the other hand, the multiple styles and media of the Thai artists were amalgamated into a joint exhibit, where their identities were lost within the group and potentially failed to capture the exposure intended by the prestigious international art event. This lesson is well worth remembering when strategies are adopted by emerging nations for future Venice Biennale events.

## **Appendix I: Terminology**

**Conceptual Art** is a term coined in the mid-sixties to include diverse media such as photographs, documents, charts, maps, film and written proposals, that focus more on the idea than the appearance and quality of the piece. Nearly a century ago, the French artist, Marcel Duchamp, declared that he was “more interested in the ideas than the final product” (Smith, 1974, p. 256) which would later inspire conceptual artists to take a postmodern approach to life where art and the everyday merge together in concepts or ideas.

**Contemporary Art** relies on a temporal marker where many art professionals classify anything created in the past 30 years as contemporary and the best of these contemporary pieces will then move into the category of modern art as time passes (Chong, 2005).

**Visual Arts** are visual art forms such as the traditional plastic arts, including drawing, painting, printmaking, sculpture and architecture, and more modern art forms such as filmmaking and photography

**Art Machine** for the purposes of this paper, the art machine includes the professionals that contribute to the creation and dissemination of art today: artists, dealers, curators, gallery owners, collectors (private and public), art critics and intellectuals.

## **Appendix II: Biographies**

**The Venezuelan Pavilion's Worlds in Process (*Mundos en Proceso*)** included the work of 4 contemporary artists as well a late artist and geographer, Claudio Perna, and work by the Yanomami Amazonian tribes collected by anthropologist Antonio Pérez.

**Jacqueline Rousset** Pavilion commissioner and executive director of the Foundation for National Museums, Venezuelan Ministry of Culture.

**María Luz Cárdenas** Pavilion curator and current director of the Museum of Contemporary Art in Caracas, Venezuela.

**Bernardita Rakos** born in Caracas 1977 is a contemporary artist specialising in installations and digital collages, winner of numerous corporate and public art awards in Venezuela including the Salón Pirelli Young Artist award (2008) and honorific mentions at the Salón CANTV (2002) and Salón Pirelli (2004).

**Daniel Medina** born in Caracas 1978 explores territorial problems via his map sculptures and digital photography; he has won the Salón Pirelli award for Young artists (2003) and has received honorific mention from the Salón CANTV (2004) and TAGA (2004). Mr Medina has exhibited internationally at the Kwangju Biennale (2008), Miami (2008), and around Latin America.

**Magdalena Fernandez** born in Caracas 1964, works in a variety of formats including video, drawing, photography, installations and large and small scale sculpture. She has exhibited extensively in Venezuela and around Latin America and has won first prize in the Arturo Michelena Art Award in 1998 and Eugenio Mendoza Award 1996.

**Antonieta Sosa** born in New York 1940, contemporary artist and university lecturer, has won the National Prize for visual arts 2000 and has exhibited extensively around Venezuela and in Spain.

**Thailand's Pavilion, entitled *Gondola al Paradiso Co. Ltd.*** addresses the impact of globalisation on an emerging economy by creating an imaginary travel agency promoting all things Thai, where 'national self-consciousness becomes fictitious' (Birnbaum and Volz , 2009, p. 154).

**Dr. Apinan Poshyananda** Pavilion commissioner and director-general of the Office of Contemporary Art and Culture (Ministry of Culture), Dr Poshyananda is a renowned arts curator and scholar; he curated Thailand's debut appearance in Venice in 2003.

**Thavorn Ko Udomvit** Pavilion curator, Mr Ko Udomvit is also a gallery owner (Ardel Gallery), artist and university lecturer at Bangkok's Silpakorn University. He has worked as an art adviser with various Thai businesses and was the president of the university's Art and Culture department.

**Michael Shaowanasai** born in Philadelphia, USA, in 1964, Michael graduated in Law in Thailand before pursuing art (BA San Francisco's Art Institute, MA Fine Art, School of Art Institute of Chicago) and presents controversial dialogues through performances, videos, photography and installations.

***Sakarin Krue-On*** born in 1965 and graduate of Silpakorn University's Thai Art Department, where he also teaches, Mr Krue-On works in the medium of drawing, mural stencilling, painting and mix media installations.

***Sudsiri Pui Ok*** a graduate of Chiang Mai University (BFA Print making 1999) and Silpakorn University (MA Graphic Arts 2003), Ms Pui Ok works mainly with video, installations and the internet. She has participated in artist residencies in Amsterdam, Japan and Jerusalem.

***Wantanee Siripattananuntakul*** Silpakorn University graduate (BFA Sculpture 1998) and current lecturer, Ms Siripattananuntakul has studied and exhibited in Bremen, Germany, and works in conceptual media (video, internet, printed work) and small-scale sculptures.

***Suporn Songdej*** Arts graduate, Mr Songdej specialises in video installations.

## **References**

- Aacker, D.A. and Joachimsthaler, E. (2000), *Brand Leadership*. Simon & Schuster, London.
- Adam, G. (2009), "Trading places" *Financial Times* (Life & Arts) 6 June, pp.1-2.
- Asian Art Archive (2009) [Online] Available at:  
<http://www.aaa.org.hk/onlineprojects/bitri/en/didyouknow.aspx> (Accessed on 9 September 2009)
- Aspden, P. (2009), "On the brand wagon" *Financial Times* (Life & Arts) 19 September, p. 11.
- Birnbaum, D. and Volz, J. (2009), (Eds.) *Making Worlds*. 53<sup>rd</sup> International Art Exhibition: Participating Countries – Collateral Events. June – November 2009 [Exhibition Catalogue]
- Braun, T. (2004), *The Philosophy of Branding: great philosophers think brands*. Kogan Page Ltd, London.
- Browaeyns, M. and Price, R. (2008), *Understanding cross-cultural management*. Pearson Education Ltd, Harlow.
- Bruce, I. (2008), *The real Venezuela: making socialism in the 21<sup>st</sup> century*. Pluto Press, London.
- Campbell-Johnston, R. (2009), "A spectre of death in Venice" *The Times*. (Arts) 9 June, p. 14.
- Chong, D. (2005), "Stakeholder relationships in the market for contemporary art" in Robertson, I. (Ed) *Understanding International Art Markets and Management*. 4<sup>th</sup> edn. 2008. Routledge, Abingdon.
- Chong, D. (2008), "Marketing in Art Business" in Robertson, I. and Chong, D. (eds.) *The Art Business*. Routledge, Abingdon.
- Crotty, M. (1998), *The Foundations of Social Research: meaning and perspective in the research process*, SAGE Publications, London.
- Dinnie, K. (2008), *Nation Branding: concepts, issues, practice*, Butterworth-Heinemann, Oxford.
- Drummond, K. (2006), "The migration of art from museum to market: consuming Caravaggio" *Marketing Theory and Practice*, 6 (1) pp. 85-105.
- Ferraro, G.P. (2006), *The cultural dimension of international business*. 5<sup>th</sup> edn. Pearson Prentice Hall, Upper Saddle River, NJ.
- Fillis, I. (2002), "An Andalusian dog or rising star? Creativity and the marketing/entrepreneurship interface" *Journal of Marketing Management*, 18 pp. 379-395.
- Fillis, I. (2004), "The entrepreneurial artist as marketer—drawing from the smaller-firm literature", *International Journal of Arts Management*, 7 (1) pp. 9-13.
- Fillis, I. (2009), "An evaluation of artistic influences on marketing theory and practice" *Marketing Intelligence and Practice*, 27 (6) pp. 753-774.
- Ghodeswar, B. (2008), "Building brand identity in competitive markets: a conceptual model" *Journal of Product & Brand Management*, 17 (1) pp.4-12.
- Hughes, R. (1984), "Art & Money" *New Art Examiner*, October / November, pp. 23-27.
- Ind, N. (2006), "Beyond branding: from abstraction to cubism" *Journal of Product & Brand Management*, 15 (2) pp. 148-149.
- Kvale, S. (2007), *Doing Interviews*. Reprint, SAGE Publications, London, 2009.
- Moody, E. (2005), "Success and failure of international arts management", in Robertson, I. (Ed) *Understanding International Art Markets and Management*. 4<sup>th</sup> edn. (2008) Routledge, Abingdon.

- Morrison, J. (2009), *International Business: challenges in a changing world*. Palgrave Macmillan, Basingstoke.
- Muir, G. (2009), *Lucky Kunst: the rise and fall of Young British Art*. Aurum, London.
- Nisbet, R. E. (2003), *The geography of thought: how Asians and Westerners think differently ...and why*. The Free Press, New York, NY.
- Phataranawik, P. (2009) "Thailand's art scene plods along despite financial turmoil" *The Nation*. 21 February [Online] Available at: [http://www.nationmultimedia.com/2009/02/21/opinion/opinion\\_30096243.php](http://www.nationmultimedia.com/2009/02/21/opinion/opinion_30096243.php) (Accessed on 27 March 2009).
- Pettifor, S. (2003), *Flavours: Thai contemporary art*. Thavibu Gallery Co. Ltd, Bangkok.
- Rabinovitch, S. (2008) "Chinese art may face bubble trouble as prices soar" *Thompson Reuters*, 12 June [Online] Available at: <http://www.reuters.com/article/inDepthNews/idUSPEK25297320080612> (Accessed: 23 September 2009)
- Rectanus, M.W. (2002) *Culture Incorporated: museums, artists and corporate sponsorships*. University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis, MN.
- Robertson, I. (Ed) (2005), *Understanding International Art Markets and Management*. 4<sup>th</sup> edn. (2008) Routledge, Abingdon.
- Robertson, I. and Chong, D. (eds.) (2008), *The Art Business*. Routledge, Abingdon.
- Salzer-Moerling, M. and Strannegard, L. (2004), "Silence of the Brands" *European Journal of Marketing*, 38 (1/2) pp. 224-238.
- Schroeder, J.E. (2005), "Artist and the Brand" *European Journal of Marketing*. 39 (11/12) pp.1201-1305
- Schroeder, J.E., and Salzer-Moerling, M. (Eds) (2006), *Brand Culture*. Routledge, Abingdon.
- Shaowanasai, M. (Ed) (2009) *Gondola al Paradiso: Notes from Paradise*. Thai Pavilion at 53rd International Art Exhibition, La Biennale di Venezia. June 2009 [Exhibition catalogue].
- Smith, R. (1974) "Conceptual Art" in Stangos, N. *Concepts of modern art: from Fauvism to Postmodernism*. 4<sup>th</sup> edn. (1997) Thames and Hudson, London.
- Swartz, D. (1997) *Culture and Power: The sociology of Pierre Bourdieu*. Chicago University Press, Chicago, IL.
- Thompson, D. (2008) *The \$12 million stuffed shark: the curious economics of contemporary art and auction houses*. Aurum, London.
- Thornton, S. (2009) *Seven Days in the Art World*, Granta, London.
- Twitchell, J.B. (2005) *Branded Nation: The marketing of Megachurch, College Inc. and Museumworld*, Simon & Schuster Paperbacks, New York, NY.
- United Arab Emirates Interact (2009) [Online] Available at: <http://www.uaeinteract.com/culture/art.asp> (Accessed on 20 September 2009).
- United Nations (2009) [Online] Available at: <http://www.un.org/en/members/index.shtml#text> (Accessed on 17 September 2009).
- Universes in Universe (2003) (*Artes visuales de las Américas, Asia, África*) [Online] Available at: <http://www.universes-in-universe.de/car/venezia/bien50/utopia/english.htm> ; <http://www.universes-in-universe.de/car/venezia/bien50/ven/espanol.htm> (Accessed on 21 September 2009)