

LXV – 65@65

Stanley Ulijaszek - 65 outdoor swims at the age of 65

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Swim #23, Venice Biennale



The Venice Biennale is overwhelming, especially day two, at the Arsenale. Day one was at the Giardini, getting off the water bus /vaporetto I looked around for swimmable places. Hyper-real sculpture of bather on a float made it good promising. The lagoon at high tide especially - mental note for later. The water was blue, the sun shone, I wore my new rust-coloured tee shirt, seemed on trend, and appropriate to the decaying location, Venice in general. Was I saying something, making a statement? No, its just a tee-shirt. I was getting into the art-critical frame of mind, anticipating national pavilions and art nationalism, I strode forward. I did not anticipate fog, on this sunny day - fog from the top of the main pavilion, fog as art. This itself is not new - Olafur has used fog as a medium successfully for decades. The fact that I thought of this in all seriousness shows how I was getting into role, striding forward. The fog was conceptual, it turned out, as well as being material, or immaterial, of both. Ten minutes into the Biennale, and things were not what they seemed, what was and what was not what it seemed, was up for grabs. Unless it was all pure thought... You can see the problem - ten minutes in, confusion and uncertainty playing mind-games, with seven hours and fifty minutes to go, including tea break. Talking of which, the cafe was good, not expensive, welcoming even, but far from being an oasis of visual calm - people seemed industrious, even when resting. This was not art as leisure, far from it.

The cow on a train track gave some respite (there should always be a cow on a train track -memo to self, bring to mind when under circumstances of circuitous bureaucracy). This is art has purpose. Focusing on art as water, with water, on water was a promising idea, giving a personal thread through a complex maze of current art. Crochet'd coral reefs - check; concrete block with traces of artists struggle with the medium before it set - evocation of getting out at the end of the Dart 10K. The zig-zagging glass line reminiscent of the line of the River Thames, the no-trespassing line which separated art work from art audience, a comment on the state of river swimming in many places - central London, Paris, Krakow. The Cosmo Eggs in the Japanese Pavilion, were just - cosmic - natural boulders on the shore attributed religious meaning. Swimming there would be amazing - memo for the future. The trees growing through the roof of the Scandinavian Pavilion just what I would expect from Scandinavia. There is a water-way through the Biennale site, with a jetty. Swimming here not on, though tempting; at the end of the day I had my Biennale swim, clearing doubt and uncertainty, confusion thrown to the water. As always, water is special and swimming does that, without fail. A swim with the help of a woman from Finland. Can you recognise a swimmer when you see one, even without the obvious props? She was a swimmer; she watched my stuff, and we shared stories of winter-swimming, the perfect sauna, while I dried off on the steps looking across the lagoon. And why Finland does sauna better than anyone else, and a question - 'why not come to Finland for one of your swims?'