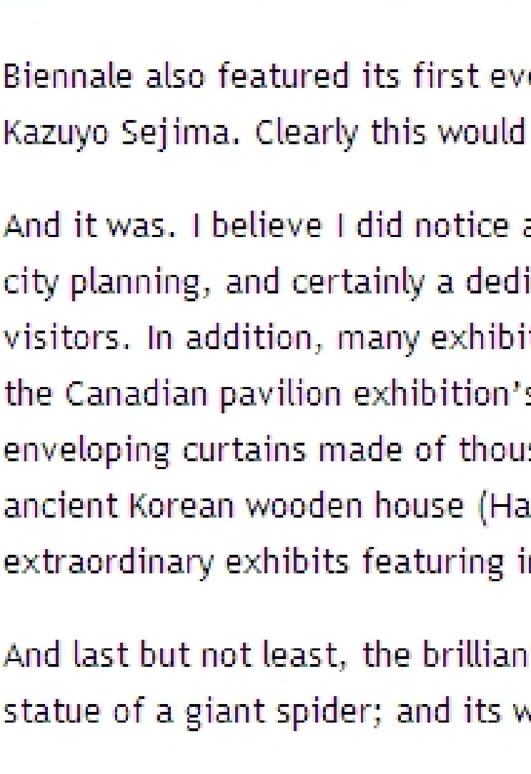
Venice Biennale—More than Just Architecture

Friday, September 24th, 2010
by Claire McCurdy on Playing Around

As a tourist in Venice twenty years ago I had certainly felt the magic of the place. My memories were of lovely but sinister Carnevale mask shops, glittering Murano glass, the brilliant light and shades of the plaza of San Marco with masses of pigeons fluttering about and landing on peoples' heads and arms, the canal, the gondoliers, cathedrals. In short, all the familiar tourist spots.



That trip, however, could not possibly have prepared me for the International Biennale Architecture Exhibition in Venice. I knew it would be a unique opportunity to immerse myself in world class exhibitions of art and architecture, absorb and learn, and bring back thoughts and images to readers. I could not have imagined how far this exhibition would take the concept of "architecture" to new and wonderful places.

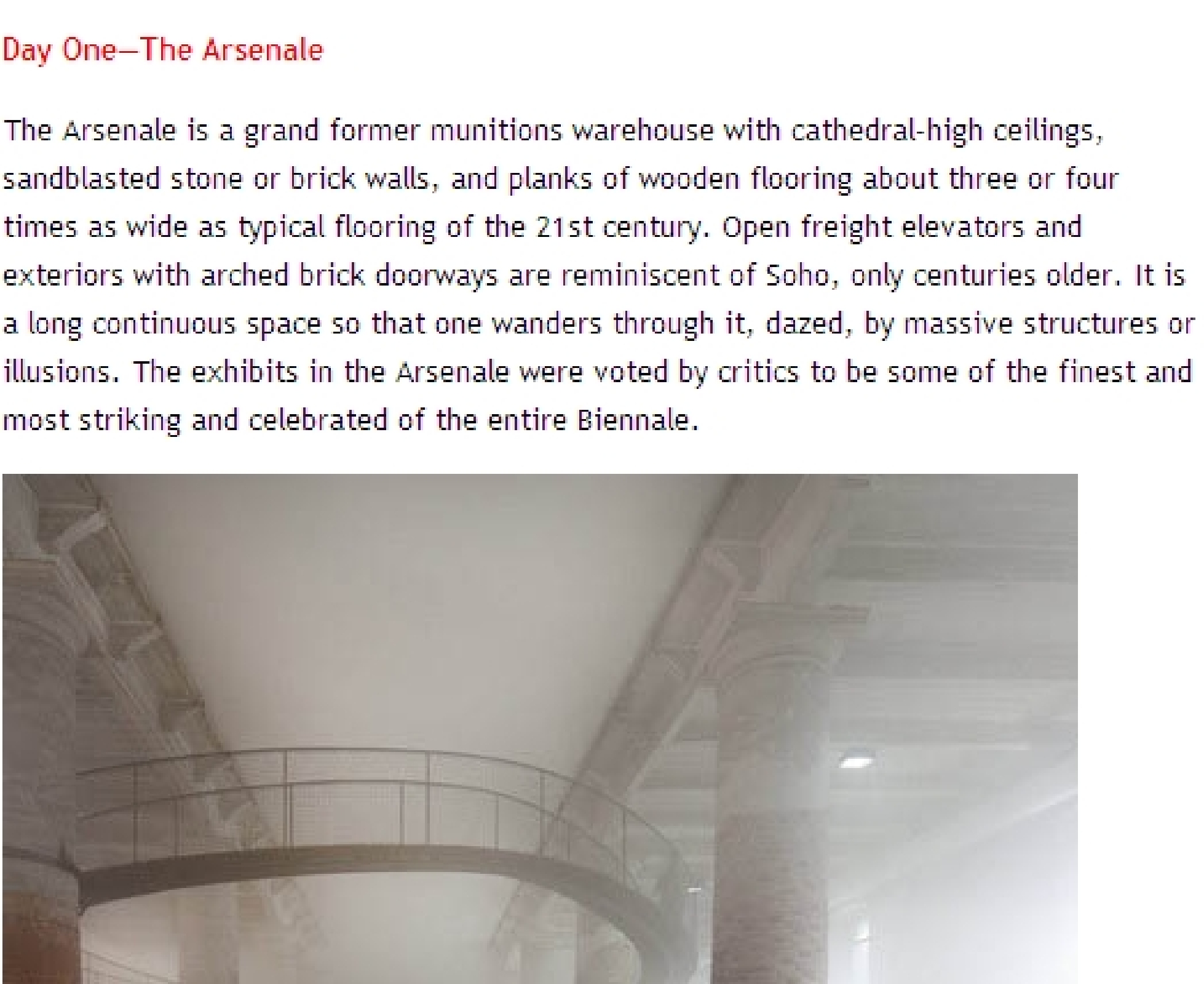
The themes of the exhibition seemed unusually accessible: "People Meet in Architecture." And the Biennale also featured its first ever woman director—a Japanese woman architect, Kazuyo Sejima. Clearly this would be a great departure from tradition.

And it was. I believe I did notice a compact, elegant Japanese influence on models of city planning, and certainly a dedication to transparency and accessibility for the visitors. In addition, many exhibits invited the visitor to communicate, touch, and play: the Canadian pavilion exhibition's brilliant white tendrilled "creature"; from Hungary, enveloping curtains made of thousands of pencils suspended on string; from Korea, an ancient Korean wooden house (Hanok) with children happily crawling all over it; and two extraordinary exhibits featuring intangible elements filling space, clouds or music.

And last but not least, the brilliant posthumous show of Louise Bourgeois, centering on a statue of a giant spider; and its webs.

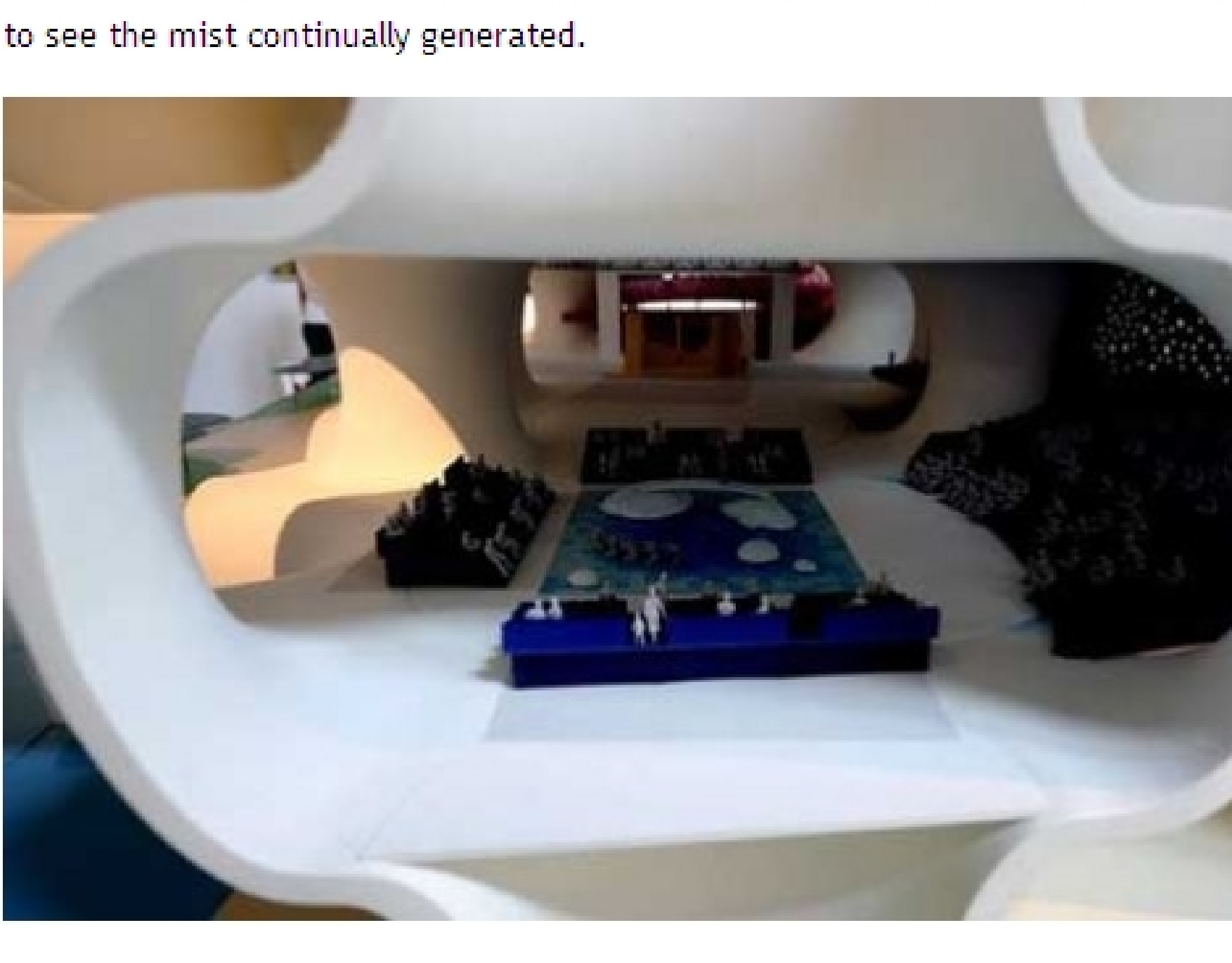
The 12th International Architecture Exhibition "People Meet in Architecture," opened in August and will run through November 21. The exhibition, laid out in the Palazzo delle Esposizioni della Biennale (Giardini) and in the Arsenale, features 48 participants—firms, architects, engineers and artists from around the world. In addition collateral events by international individuals and firms have been organized during the Biennale.

"The 2010 Architecture Biennale should be a reflection on architecture in the 21st century, clarifying new values and a new lifestyle," according to Director Kazuyo Sejima, inviting each person to be his or her own curator. "The atmosphere of the exhibition itself will therefore be achieved through multiple points of view rather than a single orientation," she said.

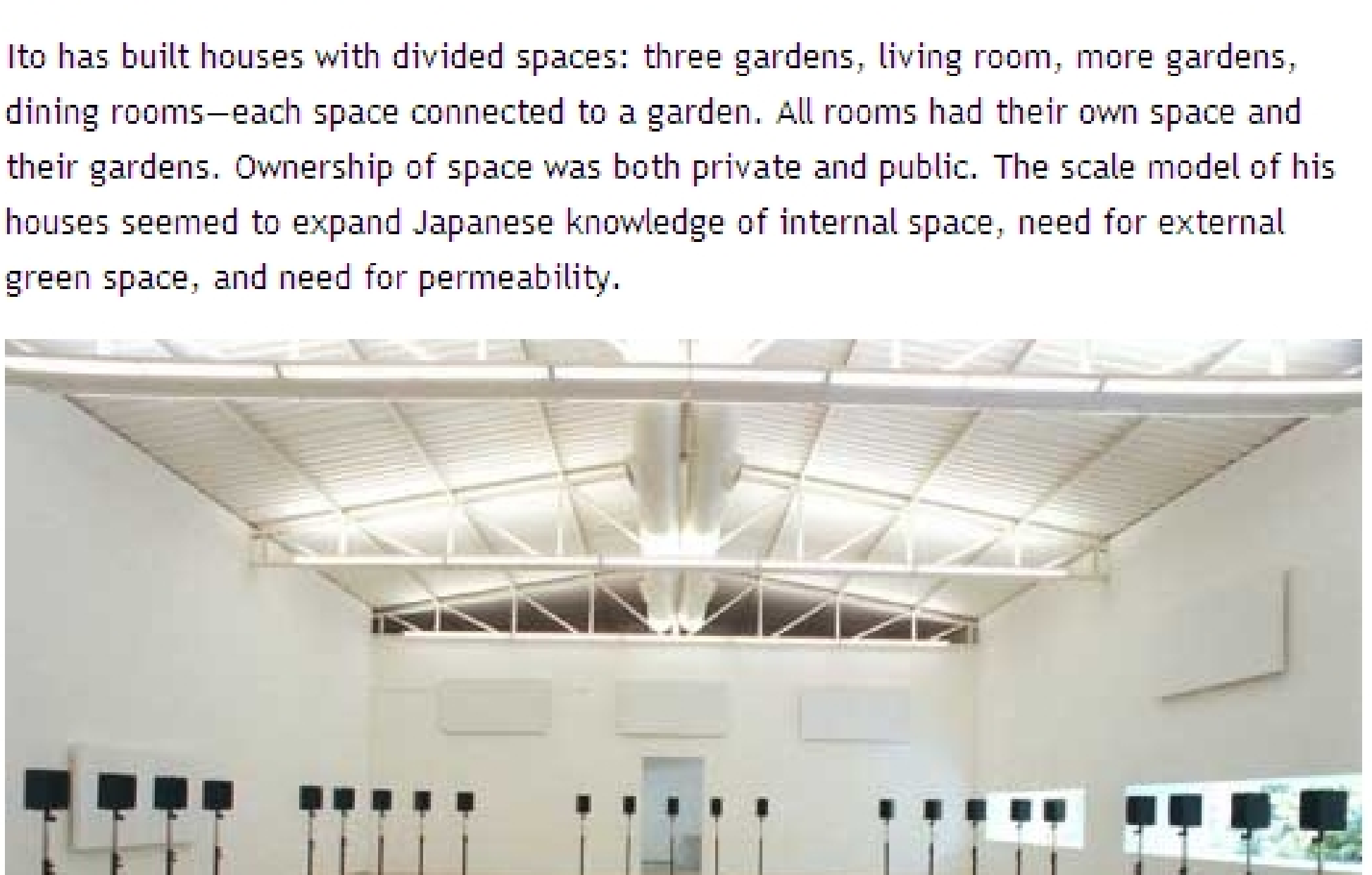


Day One—The Arsenale

The Arsenale is a grand former munitions warehouse with cathedral-high ceilings, sandblasted stone or brick walls, and planks of wooden flooring about three or four times as wide as typical flooring of the 21st century. Open freight elevators and exteriors with arched brick doorways are reminiscent of Soho, only centuries older. It is a long continuous space so that one wanders through it, dazed, by massive structures or illusions. The exhibits in the Arsenale were voted by critics to be some of the finest and most striking and celebrated of the entire Biennale.

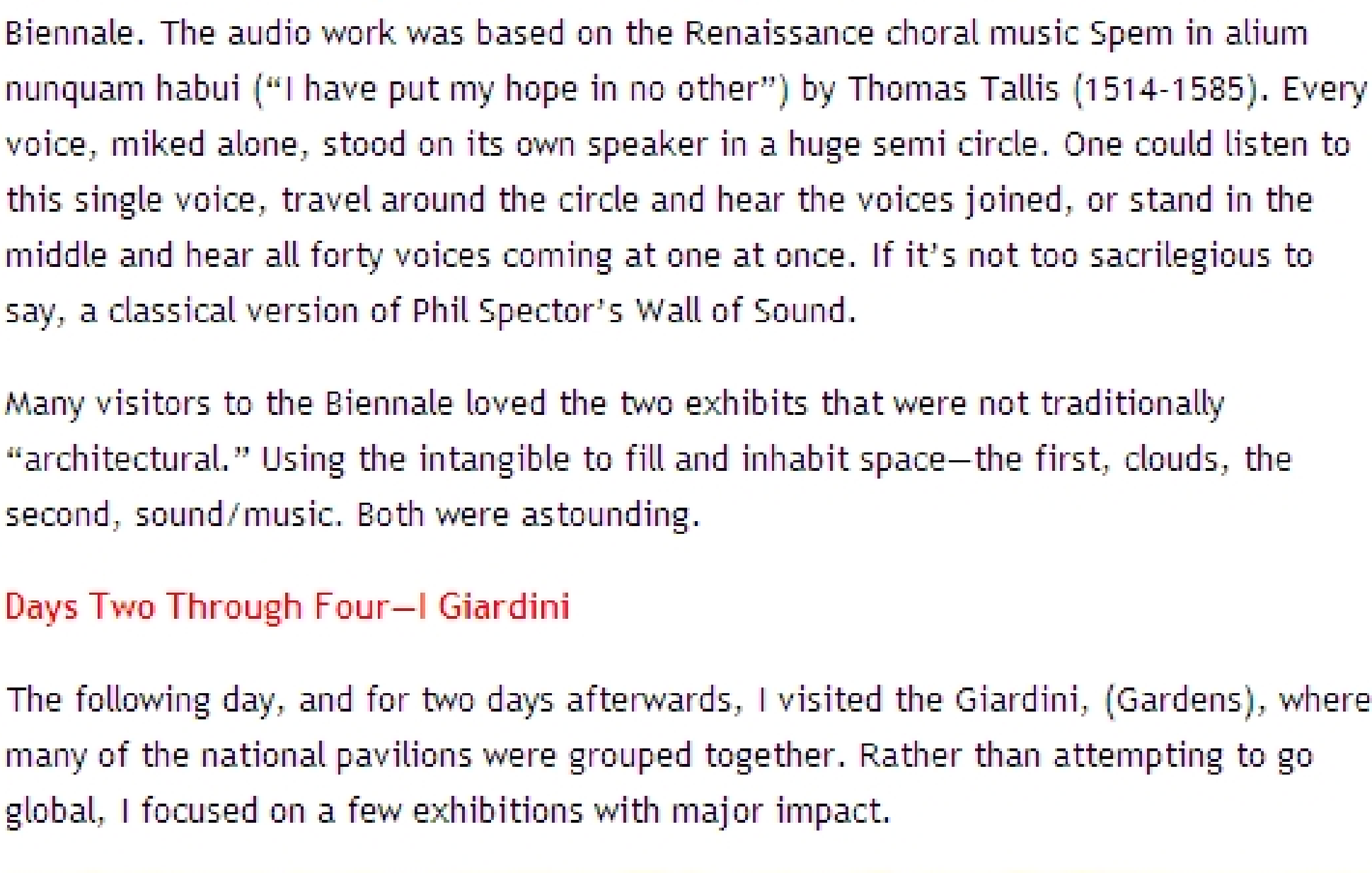


The most amazing piece in the entire Arsenale exhibition, to my eyes, was "Cloud Storm," a huge space flooded with clouds. Domed windows reflect light and cloud; and if you ascend the giant iron staircase you will come up above the clouds and can look down to see the mist continually generated.



Toyo Ito, A Japanese architect, in a video, described working with small houses and small plots of land (small to Western eyes, typical to Japanese eyes). "We do our best with this small property."

Ito has built houses with divided spaces: three gardens, living room, more gardens, dining rooms—each space connected to a garden. All rooms had their own space and their gardens. Ownership of space was both private and public. The scale model of his houses seemed to expand Japanese knowledge of internal space, need for external green space, and need for permeability.

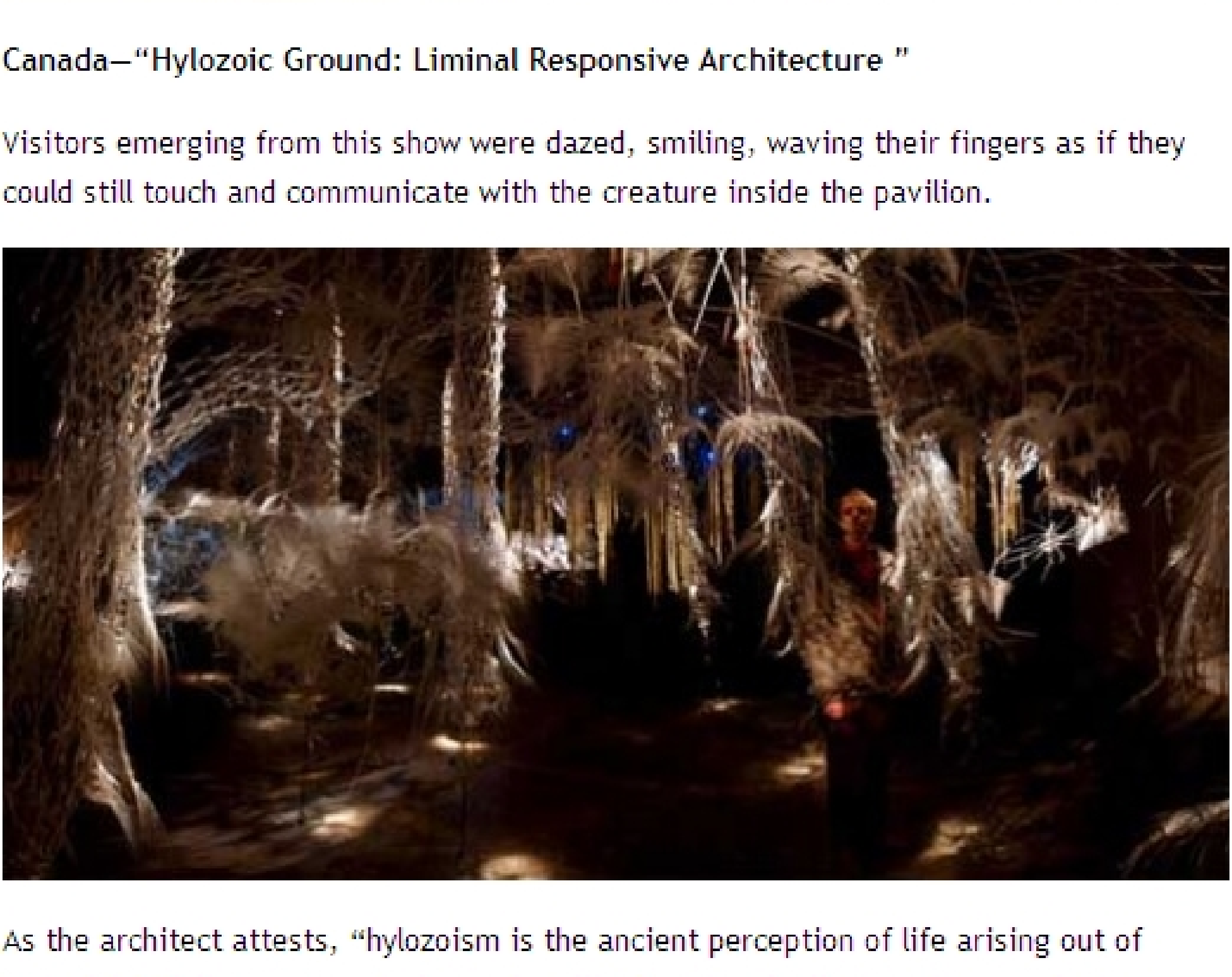


The Forty Part Motet. (Janet Cardiff / Canada) also won applause from visitors to the Biennale. The audio work was based on the Renaissance choral music Spem in alium nunquam habui ("I have put my hope in no other") by Thomas Tallis (1514-1585). Every voice, miked alone, stood on its own speaker in a huge semi circle. One could listen to this single voice, travel around the circle and hear the voices joined, or stand in the middle and hear all forty voices coming at one at once. If it's not too sacrilegious to say, a classical version of Phil Spector's Wall of Sound.

Many visitors to the Biennale loved the two exhibits that were not traditionally "architectural." Using the intangible to fill and inhabit space—the first, clouds, the second, sound/music. Both were astounding.

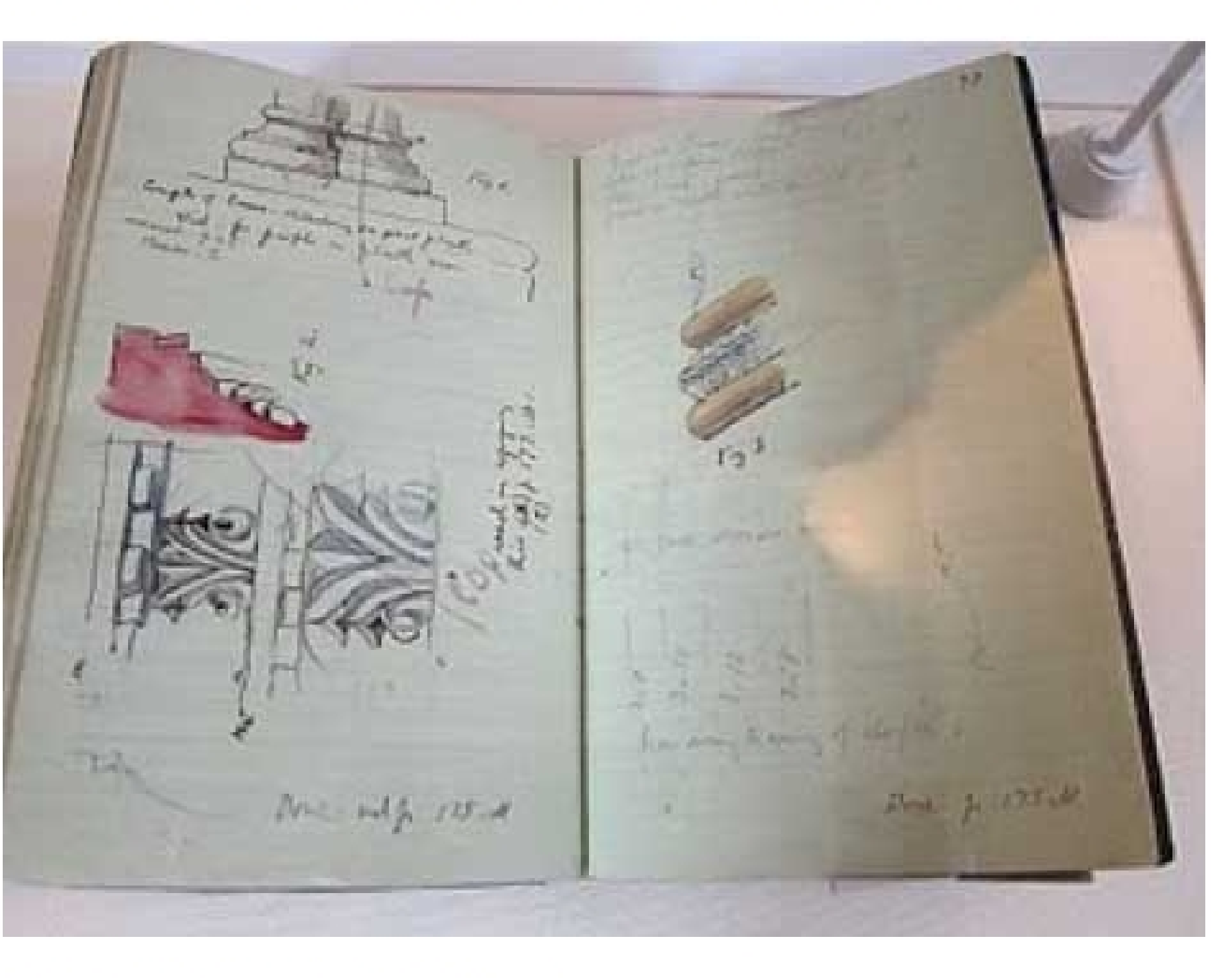
Days Two Through Four—I Giardini

The following day, and for two days afterwards, I visited the Giardini, (Gardens), where many of the national pavilions were grouped together. Rather than attempting to go global, I focused on a few exhibitions with major impact.

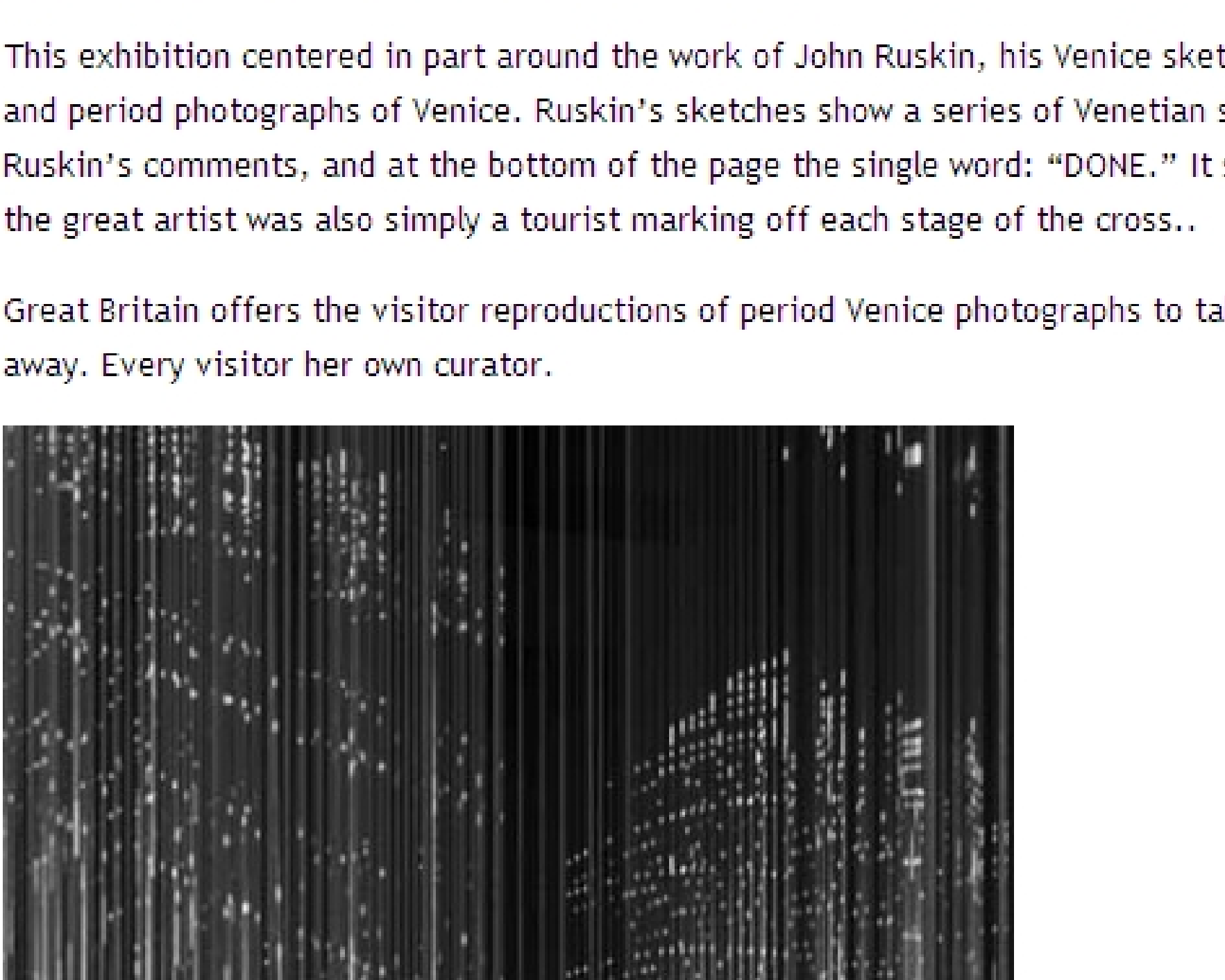


Canada—"Hylozoic Ground: Liminal Responsive Architecture "

Visitors emerging from this show were dazed, smiling, waving their fingers as if they could still touch and communicate with the creature inside the pavilion.



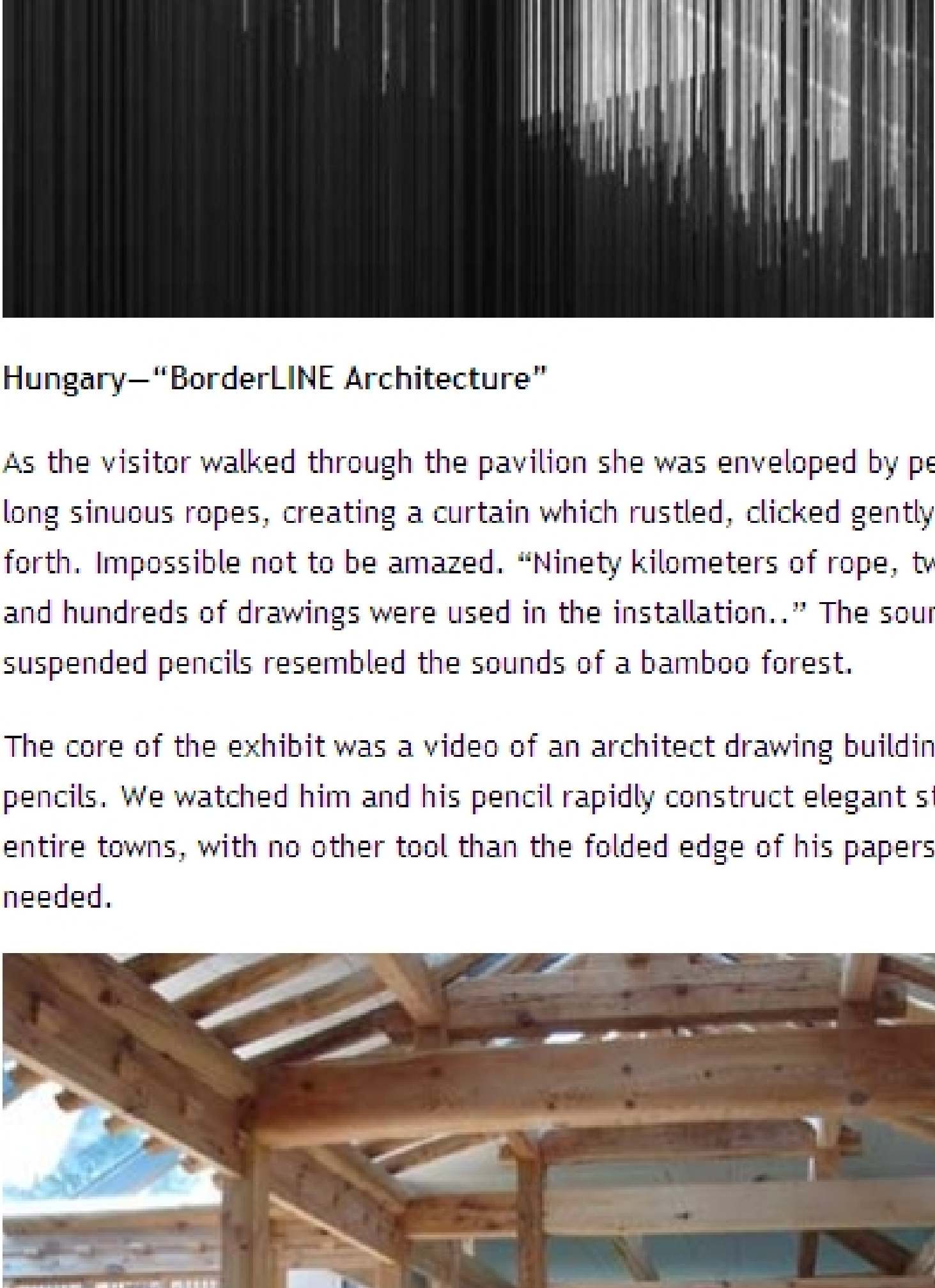
As the architect attests, "hylozoism is the ancient perception of life arising out of material." Visitors, encountering a glass-like forest and a live creature—a giant, twitching, pulsating, glowing mass of white fronds and whiskers waving gently—walked through this exhibit entranced, taking in the bright colors and gently touching the waving fronds, as if one could communicate with this alien life-form.



Great Britain—"Villa Frankenstein"

This exhibition centered in part around the work of John Ruskin, his Venice sketchbooks and period photographs of Venice. Ruskin's sketches show a series of Venetian scenes, Ruskin's comments, and at the bottom of the page the single word: "DONE." It seems the great artist was also simply a tourist marking off each stage of the cross..

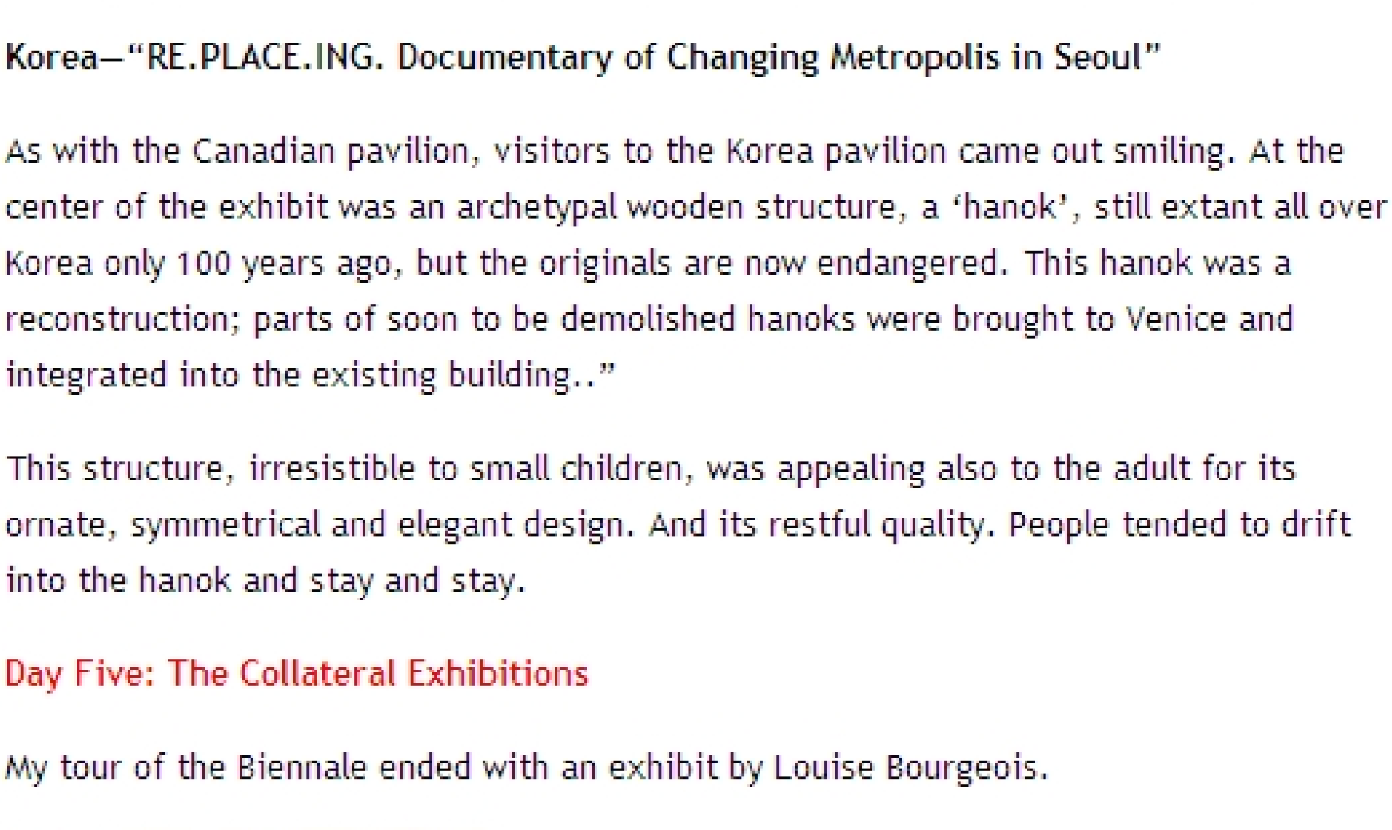
Great Britain offers the visitor reproductions of period Venice photographs to take away. Every visitor her own curator.



Hungary—"BorderLINE Architecture"

As the visitor walked through the pavilion she was enveloped by pencils suspended on long sinuous ropes, creating a curtain which rustled, clicked gently, waved back and forth. Impossible not to be amazed. "Ninety kilometers of rope, twenty thousand pencils and hundreds of drawings were used in the installation.." The sounds of these suspended pencils resembled the sounds of a bamboo forest.

The core of the exhibit was a video of an architect drawing buildings—naturally, using pencils. We watched him and his pencil rapidly construct elegant structures, roadways, entire towns, with no other tool than the folded edge of his papers. No words; none were needed.



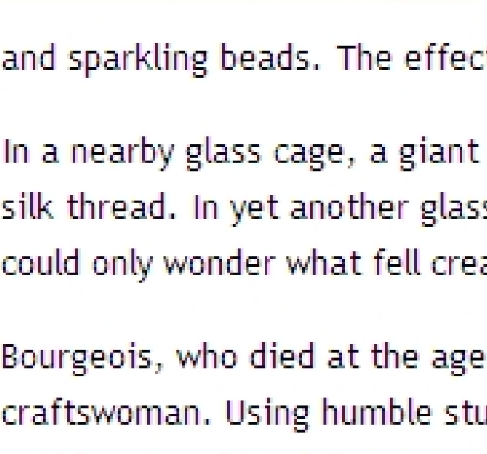
Korea—"RE.PLACE.ING. Documentary of Changing Metropolis in Seoul"

As with the Canadian pavilion, visitors to the Korea pavilion came out smiling. At the center of the exhibit was an archetypal wooden structure, a 'hanok', still extant all over Korea only 100 years ago, but the originals are now endangered. This hanok was a reconstruction; parts of soon to be demolished hanoks were brought to Venice and integrated into the existing building.."

This structure, irresistible to small children, was appealing also to the adult for its ornate, symmetrical and elegant design. And its restful quality. People tended to drift into the hanok and stay and stay.

Day Five: The Collateral Exhibitions

My tour of the Biennale ended with an exhibit by Louise Bourgeois.



Louise Bourgeois—"The Fabric Works"

The show rang many changes on the theme of feminist/women's art, and had more than a touch of the ancient divine. The central statue, a gigantic and menacing bronze "Crouching Spider" was juxtaposed to its "webs" of fabric. The spider and webs conjured up those dual images used for women throughout time—of creativity, spinning threads and nurturing, creating cocoons, and also of ferocity and destruction.

The witty webs, placed on the walls, were constructed of Bourgeois' own clothing—coarse mattress ticking and fine lustrous silks and satin, embroidery, buttons, and sparkling beads. The effect was both rich and surreal.

In a nearby glass cage, a giant silk cocoon was attached to brilliantly colored spools of silk thread. In yet another glass cage, multiple gigantic cocoons hung in mid-air. One could only wonder what fell creatures were brooding in there. And what would hatch.

Bourgeois, who died at the age of 98 in May of this year, was both artist and a master craftswoman. Using humble stuffs like the mattress ticking, she created high art—evoking thoughts of those ancient spinners the Three Fates.

To my eyes, this exhibit, on a quiet side street, shouted aloud of the feminine and of the divine. Bourgeois herself wrote: "I have a religious temperament. I have not been educated to use it. I'm afraid of power. It makes me nervous. In real life, I identify with the victim. That's why I went into art."

If I had had to choose only one exhibit to see during the Biennale, it would have been this one.

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