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ART

The Art World's Olympics

Century-old event copes with downturn; artists' moms cook soup

By KELLY CROW

VENICE—The Venice Biennial, which opens to the public on Sunday, arrives during a turbulent moment in the contemporary art world.

The shaky global economy helped sink prices for new art last fall and exacerbated a world-wide pullback in arts sponsorship. The result is a biennial that is quieter than two years ago, although the competition for attention is still intense.

The U.S. and France are hosting opening-night cocktail receptions instead of lavish dinners. Russia, meanwhile, says it needs help meeting its roughly \$993,000 pavilion budget. It's around \$70,000 shy. Over at the Palazzo Michiel dal Brusa, Iceland and Singapore are asking artists' mothers to cook Thursday's shared

party meal—Icelandic fish soup and wonton soup, respectively.

Early last fall, organizers said 92 countries were expressing interest in joining the biennial but the number eventually dropped to 77, still a record. Among the absent: India, which is instead championing four Indian artists like Nikhil Chopra who are already exhibiting in other group shows here. "This is not the year to throw the biennial's most extravagant dinner," says Carlos Basualdo, commissioner for the U.S. pavilion.

The biennial is the Olympics of the contemporary art world, a century-old tradition in which countries send in their best artists to exhibit in pavilions and palazzos across the city. Instead of medals, artists vie for recognition on the global art field. The stakes here are high—Olafur

Eliasson and Ernesto Neto are among the breakout biennial artists who went on to global fame.

The event is a proven hit with the public, and nearly 400,000 people are expected to visit the biennial before it closes Nov. 22. Roughly the same number of people attended in 2007.

Paolo Baratta, the biennial's president, says he began preparing for a financial slowdown last year by asking major artists in the biennial's group show, "Making Worlds," to help pay their own shipping and installation. He also raised ticket prices to \$25 from around \$20. (The 30,000 invited VIPs still get in free.) Such moves allowed him to use more of his roughly \$10 million budget to defray costs for younger artists.

Participating nations say they would rather scale back sharply than



Installation shot of New Mexico-based artist Bruce Nauman's audio piece "Days" at the 53rd Venice Biennial, which this year will feature a record 77 countries.

bow out, and a visit to the biennial's two primary venues helps explain why. Around 30 small buildings in a variety pack of architectural styles

stand closely together within the Giardini, a Napoleonic park on the city's eastern edge. Nations who have
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Beyond Borders: Artists to Watch at the Biennial



Canada ▶

Mark Lewis makes short films using the bygone Hollywood technique known as rear projection, which gave actors moving, if artificial, backdrops. Canada's pavilion will show four of his new films, including "The Fight," which shows two angry groups circling for a brawl.



◀ Iceland

Ragnar Kjartansson may have titled his performance piece "The End," but the real work is just beginning. Every day for the next six months, this Reykjavik-based artist plans to spend hours in a Grand Canal palazzo painting the same hired model in a bathing suit. Expect the canvases—and curious onlookers—to pile up. "It's a mundane activity, but it's also terribly romantic," says curator Markus Andresson.

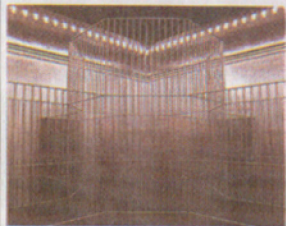
Denmark/Norway/ Finland/Sweden ▶

Curators Michael Elmgreen and Ingar Dragset give the biennial a sassy twist by turning the pavilions for these Scandinavian nations into homes for two faux collectors who apparently have bad luck—"A, Family" is divorcing and "Mr. B" is drowned in the pool—but cheeky taste in art. Look for pieces by Han & Hirm, Wolfgang Tillmans and Hernan Bas.

▼ France

Claude Lévêque took a daringly confrontational approach with his installation, "Le Grand Soir": "I want people to walk in and feel they are in prison." The artist accomplishes this by sending visitors into a silvery warren of metal cages with black flags fluttering just out of reach.





◀ Russia

The Russian pavilion's "Victory Over the Sun" group show aims to give off avant-garde energy. Alexey Kalima created a room-sized mural of a crowd at a soccer match and Andrei Molodkin's "Le Rouge et Le Noir" features two vitrines shaped like the Nike of Samothrace, filled with either crude oil or blood. "It's brutal and beautiful," says curator Olga Sviblova.

United States ▶

Bruce Nauman is an Indiana-born artist who rose to fame in the 1970s by using neon tubing, animal hides and ambient sounds to push conceptual art beyond the slick borders of Pop and into video art. Now, his neon signs that flash words like "Prudence" and "Pride" ring the roofline of the U.S. pavilion. In a new twist, commissioner Carlos Basualdo placed additional pieces in two local schools, and the artist enlisted local students to translate his latest sound piece, "Giorni," into Italian.

