

DAMN!

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Language melts into summer

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Too real to be surreal



It goes without saying that the Venice Art Biennale divides opinion, for that is the very nature of the sometimes-beautiful beast. The 58th edition was entrusted to the American curator Ralph Rugoff and his headline theme, *May You Live In Interesting Times*, appears a warning to appreciate the world as it is by observing it. And given Rugoff's decision to only feature living artists, what we end up with are observers of our time. Jumping around the locations, DAMN's man on the ground gives his own point of view on the points of view on show.

To live in the present time, as Ralph Rugoff – whose day job is director of London's Hayward Gallery – encourages us to do, is also to accept extreme complexity. And that may be the reason why he asked Lara Favaretto to plunge the Central Pavilion into a thick fog so as to mask its outlines. Fujiko Nakaya already did this with the Pepsi Pavilion of the Osaka World Expo in 1970. But fortunately, there is no patent on the use of fog in art.

Rugoff asked the 79 participating artists to present two works with very distinct forms to exhibit some in the Giardini and others in the Arsenale, as if to emphasise the diversity of points of view, even via a single look. Ryoji Ikeda accepted the challenge by offering two installations, one of which is entitled

spectra III in the Central Pavilion. It is a corridor whose white light dazzles us so much that we protect ourselves with our hands, as though not to observe the unobservable. This excess might suggest the mass of information that daily overwhelms us, sometimes preventing us from taking the time to make a personal opinion about the society in which we all play a part. The extreme light of this passage inevitably leads to an elsewhere that can also illustrate the inexorable end that we refuse to consider, building the mental images of spaces where the body would be superfluous.

It is with the installation *Endodrome* by Dominique Gonzalez-Foerster that we experience the loss of the body by first being invited to sit at a table and then to

put on a VR headset. For the next eight minutes we are immersed in a universe in a gaseous state, without any gravity or apparent limits, until we realise that we can act on its form with movement – unconscious at first – of the head. We can create spirals that immediately become self-sustaining as do smoke puffs in the enclosed environment of interiors. Nothing in our field of vision indicates reality as we know it, including the absence of a body that is a prisoner in its sitting position in the old rope factory of the Arsenale. The rules of the game having been defined by the artist, it is a kind of interior spectacle in which we actively participate that is played out to marvel us. It is a state of consciousness modified by the very images that we initiate while suspending control.

Ed Atkins, *Old Food*, 2017-2019, still



Immateriality, in the Giardini, is not just virtual if one considers the sculptural installation *A Monument for Lost Time* by Larissa Sansour with Søren Lind in the Danish pavilion. Why? Because the object we observe, even carefully, does not yield any information, neither about its shape nor its thickness, and as a witness, I can assure you that even contorting yourself to another viewing point changes nothing. Is it a disc or rather a sphere? Never, without rushing the spectator boundary that keeps us at a distance, will we know. What we learn is that the object, the very existence of which appears to us in suspense, has been covered with a particularly matte flat black. The acrylic paint, eager for light and summoning the sublime, is Stuart Semple's Black 2.0 and available online – although famously not to Anish Kapoor. Fellow artists still bristle over Kapoor's exclusive rights to Vantablack, the 'blackest black of the world', but this claim – Semple is Kickstarting Black 3.0 – and 'colour feud' rumbles on. Art, the sublime, industry and trade, have never gotten along together so well.

At the Canadian Pavilion, Inuit artists featured for the first time. Isuma is a video collective led by Zacharias Kunuk and Norman Cohn whose projects focus on preserving Inuit culture and language, and finding new audiences for their stories. The main video, *One Day in the Life of Noah Piugattuk*, explores the fateful meeting in 1961 on Baffin Island between one Inuit family and a visitor from the Canadian government who tried to woo them to abandon their home for the nearby settlement on Igloolik. Promises of provisions and even wooden homes were made, but what was left un-

mentioned was the real purpose of the enforced move: the strengthening of Canada's claim on Arctic sovereignty during the Cold War. The film reveals the interplay of power politics, mistrust and manipulation – a dynamic that characterises Inuit people's defiant and proud relationship with their more dominant neighbours.

'In the next century, Venice will probably be submerged,' exclaims Rugoff in an interview with *The Art Newspaper* when he discusses the consequences of global warm-

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ing both on territories and populations. The Lithuanian Pavilion, *Sun & Sea*, won the Golden Lion for best national pavilion. It revealed that making good art about climate change doesn't have to be all gloom and fear. The work was an unexpected operatic performance by theatre director Rugilė Barzdžiukaitė and playwright Vaiva Grainytė. Visitors gazed down from a mezzanine balcony onto a bustling beach where performers were choreographed to do not much more than frolic, lounge and apply extra sunblock. But it was their nothingness action that mattered most. A day at the beach singing about trivial inconveniences – the sort of

trifling mindset that is heading us all towards climate dystopia. Characters flick through magazines and scroll through iPhones, nagging in song to music by composer Lina Lapelytė about dog poop on the beach, and no more snow at Christmas. The chilling message that the encroaching environmental catastrophe seems almost too sunny and easy.

Laure Prouvost partially flooded the floor of the French pavilion with a layer of resin. But the thin layer of blue has also frozen time by imprisoning rubbish, plants and shells among bits of outmoded electronics – a boon for future underwater archaeologists if nothing radical or downright obvious is done to avoid the worst. The perfectly smooth surface of the floor appears to us in opposition to the organic matter or damaged objects contained within. The electronic remnants of the installation *Deep See Blue Surrounding You*, which in such a short time have lost all of their useable value, signals a form of time acceleration. They are surrounded by cigarette butts that further reinforce

their total lack of value. But from this disparate and frozen set a form of nostalgia emerges, which is that of suspended time.

Christian Marclay takes another look at time by assembling war movies. The sequence *48 War Movies* has no real beginning or end. It testifies, by its cacophony, to the murderous follies of different times. So relevant when we know that history teaches us that the inexorable progression of nationalisms announce wars, deaths, population displacements, and trigger the shrinking of identities. This creation by Marclay, whose work usually revolves

around the notion of appropriation, is as hypnotic as it is deafening. Of the 48 films of reconstructed wars, we only perceive a form of synthesis that fascinates us, especially when we are lucky enough to have only known war through movies, TV series, documentaries or the news. Can we, then, appreciate these times of peace? Something that not everyone has the luxury to enjoy when our countries are also involved in the arms trade.

For the Polish Pavilion, Roman Stańczak also explores changing times with an installation set up in stark contrast with the glittering yachts docked around Venice for summer. He presents a gutted private jet that he reconstructed inside-out. The once sleek beast, a status symbol that could mount the skies and scream success, has been unceremoniously grounded, left in a frantic ball of exposed wires, belts, windows, and metal plates. It's identifiable, but only just. *Flight* is a project about possibilities gone awry and delivers a cutting critique of Poland's capitalist regime – a system broken into an inevitable pile of destruction made all the more harsh given its once intimate association with individual wealth. But how can it dissolve to such a crisis?

Following on from such questions, it is then that one perceives the possible cynicism of Rugoff that artists like Alex Da Corte treat with humour. He has designed small sequences whose burlesque attributes conjure up silent films while the perfectly groomed aesthetic of the 57 sequences of the installation *Rubber Pencil Devil* evokes that of television, and more generally advertising. Everything is too good to

be true in this world where colours come together so perfectly. However, the American artist, whose studio looks like a film set, applies almost no effects to the scenes he shoots, going so far as to play in some of them himself. Humour, which in television as in advertising is a source of income, is very present. Here, the 'real' is only interpreted as it is done in the theatre, making us forget the sad reality of our sometimes-grey lives. Beyond the video image, there are neon lights just as colourful and just as compelling as those we find in ur-

It cries incessantly with the long sobs of an adult – as if it could not forgive itself for the faults it probably hasn't yet committed. It has a strange presence, reminiscent of the polychrome sculptures of crying virgins by Pedro de Mena from 17th-century Spain.

ban advertisements. Everything in Da Corte's approach is a matter of staging, where chance, at least in appearance, never invites itself. But do we not also put our lives on social media, especially when we find ourselves in the idyllic setting that Venice offers and where selfie-poles are legion?

Ed Atkins' aesthetic is that of three-dimensional renderings that exist only in machines. With his *Old Food* series presented at the Arsenale, he tells little stories that intermingle with each other to establish a kind of tale. On the screen, we notice a baby that we learn was designed in the image of the artist.

It cries incessantly with the long sobs of an adult – as if it could not forgive itself for the faults it probably hasn't yet committed. It has a strange presence, reminiscent of the polychrome sculptures of crying virgins by Pedro de Mena from 17th-century Spain. The use of the three dimensions, in both cases, adds a supplementary soul to these representations of beings in tears. The groans of this infant that nothing can comfort are those of the artist himself. This has the effect of increasing the strangeness of the scene in which a man of a mature age follows. He too is absolutely sad and seems just as inconsolable. His voice is similar, so we imagine him at different ages of a life without redemption.

Other artists at the Biennale are particularly fond of the aesthetics of computer-generated images. The Canadian Jon Rafman is one such artist, who was invited by Rugoff to participate. His style is somewhat hobbyist, as is the trend in the world of art, unlike the oh so perfect 3D universe of animation films and vid-

eo games. Here, bodies, for example, do not really have weight, as in dreams. A lack which, in the case of *Dream Journal* is quite suitable since it is a story revolving around dreams, each one stranger than the next. The sequences are typical of a form of automatic writing dear to the surrealists, who already knew how to free themselves from the binding limits of reality. Thus, among the protagonists of a story where curiosities follow each other, a young boy has neither torso nor arms, and monsters rub shoulders with humans that at times happily overlap. There is much material here for contemporary art loving psychoanalysts to study.



Barbara Wagner & Benjamin de Burca, *Swinguerra*, 2019, still from film, courtesy of Fundação Bienal de São Paulo



Larissa Sansour & Søren Lind, *In Vitro, Heitloom, Danish pavilion*, photo: Ugo Carmeni



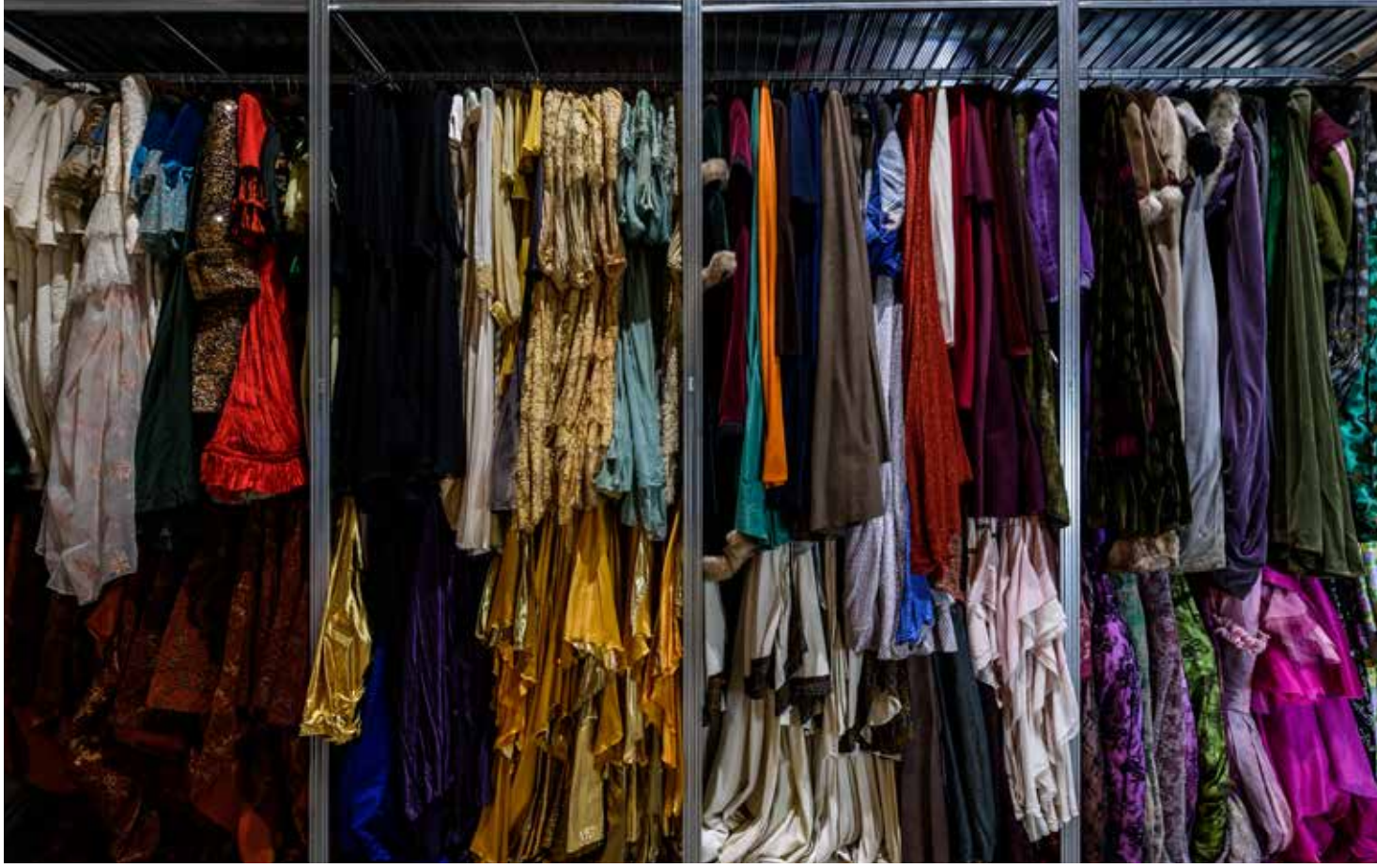
Alex Da Corte, *Rubber Pencil Devil*, 2019, mixed media, photo: Andrea Avezzi

Isuma, still from *One Day in the Life of Noah Plugattuk*, 2019, © Isuma Distribution International, photo: Levi Uttak

Shu Lea Cheang and Paul B. Preciado, 3x3x6, still from CASANOVA X, courtesy of Taipei Fine Arts Museum



Ed Atkins, Old Food, 2017-19, still from film, photo: Andrea Avezzi



Rugile Barzdziukaitė, Vaiva Grainyte, Lina Lapelyte, Sun&Sea (Marina), © Andrej Vasilenko CULTURAL COMMENTS



Roman Starzecak, Flight, 2019, pavilion of Poland, photo: Andrea Avezzi, courtesy of La Biennale di Venezia



Sun Yuan and Peng Yu, *Can't Help Myself*, 2016, courtesy of Guggenheim

Machines are also honoured in Rugoff's selection. Like the totally autonomous industrial robot that artists Sun Yuan & Peng Yu put to work in the central Giardini pavilion for *Can't Help Myself*. Its task is as simple as it is repetitive because, equipped with a kind of squeegee, it must contain the puddle of a reddish liquid within its scope of action. Its mission is futile since it is 'condemned' until the end of the Biennale to clean up what looks like blood here, to then stain the soil there. But it is unaware of this and that is what opposes machines to humans. This robot, passing from the world of industry to that of art, is observed differently. Its usefulness is aesthetic, and the vanity of its mission can encourage us to relativise the importance of the actions or rituals that we sometimes repeat without asking too many questions. As for the idea that this reddish liquid could be spilled blood that a device could not contain, one thinks

then of the atrocities of the world that one would like to silence but which, always, end up being revealed.

While the robot of the installation *Can't Help Myself* remains indifferent to our presence, it is not the same within the Palazzo delle Prigioni. Here, the artist Shu Lea Cheang has installed a monitoring device that continuously scrutinises all our actions and gestures. The palace, well before hosting the exhibition *3X3X6* of the Taiwan Pavilion, was a prison connected to the Palazzo Ducale by the famous Bridge of Sighs. The libertine writer Giacomo Casanova stayed there, and the Taiwanese artist, living and working in Paris, was inspired to stage the stories of a dozen people who were imprisoned for their sexually 'deviant' behaviour - a chilling example of the way surveillance and control often go hand in hand. States that invest heavily in technologies that are constantly

renewed to monitor the smallest of our activities, also consider themselves the guarantors of morality. But that is without counting on social media to liberate speech for better and for worse. And if we can see through the fog, in the end there are no major societal issues that are left unaddressed in this edition of the Biennale.

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