

DISPATCH

VENICE

Venice Biennale

Christine Macel, curator of the Centre Pompidou and of “Viva Arte Viva,” the 57th International Exhibition, describes art as a force for life: “Art in itself helps us to navigate in these times; its very existence is a resistance in itself... Contemporary art cannot be understood as mere representation or imitation: it is a reality *tout court*, an instrument of inquiry, both of the creative process and of the different questions pertaining to Humankind and the world.”

Macel’s selection of Carolee Schneemann for the Golden Lion Lifetime Achievement Award, based in part on a career devoted to pioneering performances and installations probing the relationship between the body and freedom, coupled with Tehching Hsieh’s representation of Taiwan and the guidelines of “Viva Arte Viva,” suggest that Venice in 2017 might be a fertile field for an investigation into the theme of the body as art. But the show, which does not disappoint, is more than that. It is the task of sculpture to produce spatial experiences, and many of the artists question the position of the body in contemporary space, considering it in relation to bio-politics and control structures, machines and media, and the body politic. For Schneemann, “It was in the body that the energy and the confirmation of what I’d seen and lived was coherent. That was an area that hadn’t been colonized.” For Hsieh, who specializes in physical pain and endurance, performance becomes a form of education and a path to empathy. The deprivations and hardships to which he subjects himself are no different than what

Above: Anne Imhof, *Faust*, 2017.

Right: Jesse Jones, *Tremble Tremble*, 2017.



many people call life—clocking in, living outside without shelter, seeking privacy under constant surveillance.

Anne Imhof’s brilliant *Faust* (2017, German Pavilion) was awarded the Golden Lion for best national participation. As described by curator

Susanne Pfeffer, “*Faust* is both a five-hour production and a seven-month-long scenario comprised of performative dynamics, sculptural installations, painterly touches, and rigorously choreographed visual axes and movements that encompass the entire pavilion...the bound-

aries of the space disclose everything, making it both visible and subject to control. The heightened spatial proportions. Next to us, below us, above us, there are the bodies of individuals, the bodies of the many.” Imhof’s approach to the





Left: Mark Bradford, interior view of *Process Collettivo*, 2017. Below: Peju Alatise, *Flying Girls*, 2016.

space of the German Pavilion, which was redesigned by the Nazis in 1938, is fascinating. She is not the first artist to confront the massive scale and stark appearance head-on. I was reminded of Hans Haacke's *Germania* (1993), in which he uprooted and

smashed the marble floor tiles. Haacke was one of the first artists to treat a national pavilion as a subject of inquiry, rather than just an exhibition space.

By inserting an elevated glass platform, Imhof alters the proportions

between body and space, creating an emotional experience that plays out by standing above and on bodies. This element intertwines two architectures of power, since clear glass is the material of choice whenever architecture is about money and

power. According to Imhof, "Only by forming an association of bodies, only by occupying space can resistance take hold. On the balustrades and fences, underground and on the roof, the performers conquer and occupy the room, the house, the pavilion, the institution, the state."

Outside, Dobermans stand guard. Imhof links dog and man as undergoing a shared transformation. As I entered the pavilion, my memory of the dogs' movements translated to the gestures and movement of the performers in the space beneath my feet. While I see Imhof's work as sculpture, she defines it as a process of becoming a picture. Each picture however, depends on interaction with the viewer: "A picture doesn't work without the person looking at it."

Jesse Jones's *Tremble Tremble* (2017, Pavilion of Ireland) was inspired by the death of Savita Halappanavar, a young Indian dentist living in Ireland, who died when she was denied a life-saving abortion because her fetus had a "heartbeat." Her death sparked a protest movement to amend the Irish Constitution and give women control over their own bodies. Jones, whose work focuses on political and social histories embedded within everyday life, considers the national pavilion as the site of an alternative law. Her title was inspired by the wages-for-housework movement in Italy in the 1970s, during which women chanted, "*Tremate, tremate, le streghe sono tornate!*" ("Tremble, tremble, the witches have returned!"). Emerging from the current social movement in Ireland, the work calls for a transformation of the relationship between church and state while furthering Jones's interest in those moments when hidden histories come to the surface, as in demon-



TOP: JOSHUA WHITE, COURTESY THE ARTIST AND HAUSER & WIRTH / BOTTOM: UGOCHUKWU BENSON IBEABUCHI FOR THE NIGERIAN PAVILION

strations and strikes. As a potential catalyst in this change, Jones proposes the return of the witch as a feminist archetype and disrupter with the potential to transform reality. *Tremble Tremble* is accompanied by a sound score composed by Susan Stenger, who creates what she calls “sonic reactions.”

Right Here, Right Now (2017), Qudus Onikeku’s contribution to the inaugural Nigerian Pavilion (which also featured Peju Alatise’s dramatic *Flying Girls*, 2016), uses performance and dance in live and film versions to shape a cultural and national identity outside the colonialist narrative that has defined the country. Like Schneemann, Onikeku considers the body to be the one thing untouched by colonialism. As he sees it, the mind was “dented” by education, and the soul by imposed religion, but the body remained untouched, because even when submitted to pain the body gets stronger. Onikeku’s work tries to address this through choreographies that free the body from history, using dance to evoke a visceral response and trigger memories for audience members.

Olafur Eliasson’s *Green light—An artistic workshop*, part of “Viva Arte Viva” in the Central Pavilion, involves 40 individuals from a range of countries—including Nigeria, Gambia, Syria, Iraq, Somalia, Afghanistan, and China—who have signed up as participants through nine local partnering NGOs based in the municipality of Venice. Divided into two teams, they take part for up to two months in the artistic project, as well as in a shared learning program, which offers free access to all its activities. Participants lead the daily lamp-building workshops, acting as hosts in the Green Light space and engaging with visitors.

Eliasson describes *Green light* as “a space of individual and collective ‘world-making’ that...spreads out into society at large.” He sees its “multi-



layered hospitality” as testing “alternative models of community. [It] is an act of welcoming, addressed both to those who have fled hardship and instability in their home countries and to the residents of the cities receiving them.” Like Thomas Hirschhorn and his *Gramsci Monument* in the Bronx, Eliasson and *Green light* have been the targets of extensive criticism. What, for some, seems altruistic and consciousness-raising can also appear exploitative, slumming with the “other” under the auspices of politically correct art. There is a kind of voyeurism and “colonialism” at work in turning immigrants into performers and placing them on display for collectors. *Green light* might have aspired to Gramsci’s idea of a “counter-hegemonic” struggle—advancing alternatives to dominant ideas of what is normal and legitimate—but that notion has trouble translating into art. Many in the art world agree with Hirschhorn’s assessment that the project itself is enough: “Art—because it’s Art—is resistance as such. Resistance to aesthetical, cultural, political habits.”

Mark Bradford’s involvement with local communities in Venice stands in stark contrast. In conjunction with *Tomorrow is Another Day*, his U.S. Pavilion installation, he has embarked on a six-year collaboration with the Venetian nonprofit social cooperative Rio Terà dei Pensieri, which provides employment opportunities to incarcerated men and women and supports their re-integration into society. *Process Collettivo* aims to launch a sustainable long-term program that raises awareness of both the penal system and the success of the social cooperative model. Motivated by an inquiry into “need” and “research into access,” Bradford’s pluralistic and inclusive vision of the world redefines what it means to be an artist and a citizen. Perhaps it is no accident that his project grew from listening to the needs of the participants (and not the other way around), given his own experiences as a gay African American.

“Viva Arte Viva,” though less stridently political than past installations of the biennial, still makes bold claims for art. From the individual to the collective, to the social

Olafur Eliasson, *Green light—An artistic workshop*, 2017.

body politic, it celebrates the revolutionary and liberating potential of art. The question, as always, is who benefits. Paolo Barrata, president of the Biennale, invoked the old idea of humanism: “We decided it would be useful to dedicate this edition to a reflection which, while starting from a vision of the world as a place of conflict and falsity, shows the work of the artist as an act of freedom and resistance...This humanism, through art, celebrates mankind’s ability to avoid being dominated by the powers governing world affairs, which if left to their own devices can greatly affect the human dimension.” Reinterpreting what some might consider an outmoded idea in the face of today’s violence, inequality, and upheaval is not without relevance: Italian Renaissance art and philosophy—both spurred on by humanism—were the products of a time just like ours; one can only hope that the benefits of art reach beyond the patrons, the star artists, and the cognoscenti this time around.

—Barbara T. Hoffman