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Review

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REVIEW

A Tale of Three Cities 2017: Art Basel, Venice Biennale, Frieze London

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Introduction

Basel and Frieze are largely commercial Art Fairs, and Venice is not, though it has a tangential relationship with the art market in which many of its exhibitors have already established reputations. So why lump them together in a single review? Because together they offer an overview of artistic fashion and its regional nuances (if any), at least in Europe. Nowadays, a more global perspective would require attendance at events in Hong Kong and Beijing. The Art Basel organisation already hosts versions in the former and Miami. Frieze now has a branch in New York. And of course, all these events do not necessarily represent what a future age might determine to be significant (to have, in artspeak, 'criticality'), nor do they offer a comprehensive survey of actual studio activity, but rather they are the epiphenomenon of what various curatorial/dealing forces deem to have immediate interest for contemporary viewers and client base. Even now, when retrospection is more prevalent than it was, it is directed towards a target audience that wants some backward glances. All eyebeams lead back to the present-day, paying viewer.

Some of the more gauche press coverage (at least in the UK) that accompanies these events hypes up the 'cutting edge' contemporaneity of much of the work, this term being a recent anodyne substitute for the good old 'avant garde'. But such a substitution is revealing. For something to be an advance guard there must be a forward moving army behind, for which it clears ground and whose presence it announces. The dominant narratives of post-Enlightenment European art postulated such a transitivity; 'advanced' work indicated what widespread taste would later accept as being normal and even hallowed. Over a century ago the pace of such change was

breathhtaking: a mere forty years separates the death of Ingres, the last neoclassicist, from Picasso's *Les Femmes d'Alger* (1907), the first cubist work. For about the last forty years, however, all talk of stylistic motion has stopped; modernism expired into post-modernism, and with it all teleological conceiving of artistic production as being en route to something else. Without a concept of collective advance there can be no avant garde. And so we are left with its faint parody: the bizarrely novel, the cutting edge that cuts into marketability but leaves no mark on posterity.

Unsurprisingly, therefore, there has arisen another tone of artistic discourse which implicitly recognises this stasis. As we said, retrospection has become quite fashionable, and we think it is so because it permits a reversal of temporal direction. With rare succinctness Heidegger remarks: 'Understanding is grounded primarily in the future (whether in anticipation or awaiting). States-of-mind temporalize themselves primarily in having been (whether in repetition or in having forgotten)' (Heidegger, 1978: 401). If 'state-of-mind' is recognised as Heideggerian for affect, his contention is that this is always examined as the pre-existing consequence of even earlier events. The present preoccupation with identity issues of all kinds, whether personal, post-colonial, gendered, cultural or religious, has decisively turned aesthetic attention away from formalistic or indeed experimental enquiries of any kind, towards actual or inferred narrative content. Every work must tell a story, which is itself autobiographical. The means it employs to do so are no longer of central interest and are merely instrumental; these are confined to existing stylistic devices rather than assayed ones which are original and conspicuous enough to impinge upon, or to become, content in themselves. From the zenith of reductive, non-cognitive augustness as promulgated by writers like Clement Greenberg, sixty years ago, we have come to its furthest opposite, to a cultural point which is closer to Victorian sensibility, but for the profound difference in the narratives we seek to extrapolate.

Accompanying both such a stylistic stasis and a turn to identity is the really significant change within the art world in the last forty years; the exponential growth of the art market both in intrinsic scale and in the sheer pressure it can exert on the formerly semi-autonomous zones of criticism, museum curation and patronage.

Of course, commercial considerations were not very far from the thoughts of early modernists with a living to make, but until at least the fifties the sums to be made by dealing in their work were relatively paltry. As a form of speculation, one could say that it was going almost posthumously 'long'. By contrast, many, possibly most, major galleries nowadays employ full-time staff monitoring worldwide sale prices; a 'thing of beauty' (to paraphrase Keats) being a joy, if not for ever, but at least until the market peaks. More ominously, the staff themselves may have only the slenderest knowledge of art history, let alone any native visual discernment that used to be called 'connoisseurship'. They are increasingly graduates of 'MBA Fine Art' courses as frequently run by the major auction houses, whose predictable tendency will be towards the monetizable as sole determinant of the aesthetic. The result, particularly in the last twenty years or so, has been the steady encroachment of corporate manners and mores. When taken with the observations of my previous paragraph, the complexion of this market, in a way familiar in its counterparts, blends sentimental appeals to personal authenticity as regards the work, with a tight-lipped, managerial vaunting of its being a good bet for the future. The combination can be emetic.

The following benefits from the capacity to make an informed comparison, and is the result of a fairly disinterested and conscientious survey of the work on display, unmediated by any PR.

Basel: The Infinite Foyer

Art Basel was founded in 1970, at the beginning of the market expansion referred to above. It has never attempted to efface its commercial core purpose, and its publicity material remains, by present standards, austere. With its other two offshoots it could claim to be the most reliable indicator of international purchasing trends. Basel is a comfortable place to navigate, both as a (pretty expensive) city and as a fair, hosted in two vast adjoining venues: the double storey hall this year accommodated 293 galleries and themed presentations; the hangar-sized project space, 76 installations. This makes the 50 Euro advance entry seem like relatively good value, particularly as it is all-inclusive (unlike another fair I will mention). The associated talks and events are heavily directed towards the collecting interest.

What can one say about the total experience of 'doing Basel', as we did (in June 2017), up and down the aisles, like a pair of conscientious lawnmowers? The general standard of contemporary work shown by the galleries was usually *reliably* competent, and, considering its sheer volume, displayed in sensitive ways. It is also apparent that, if this caters to European tastes, then they are refreshingly (in a UK context) immune to faddism and micro-fashion; they have a broader temporal spread. A good example is the inclusion (by Thaddaeus Ropac I think) of Robert Longo, a veteran creator of vast, velvety photorealist charcoal drawings, who received his first London show only this autumn. His work leapt out of its surroundings, but in so doing showed how bland those surroundings were. To put it bluntly, much of the work lacked any technical ambition, executed in a graphic, semi-figurative syndrome which nodded to Pop antecedents and had obviously archival photographic sources. It was work that would not upset, but would not engage. It was work for clients to mildly pause over; it was art for corporate spaces.

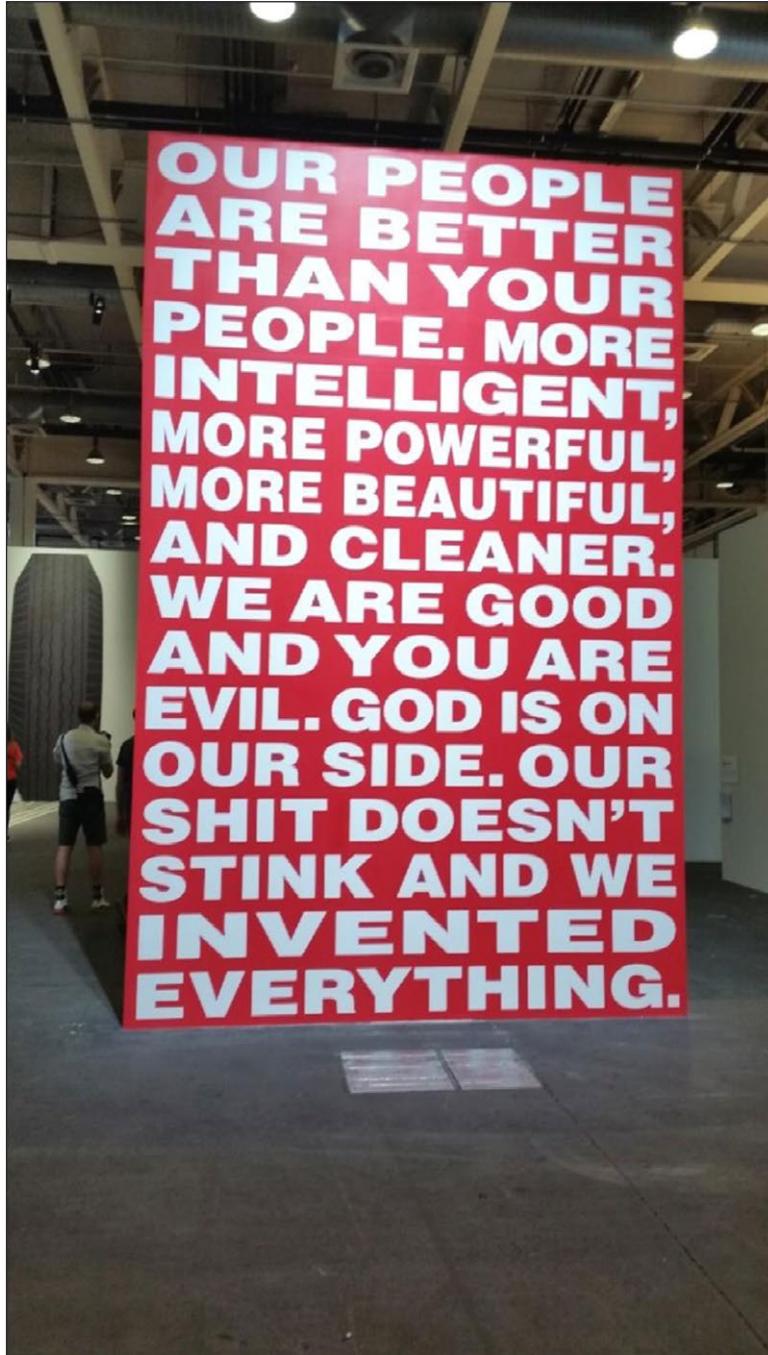
The Basel organisers, from what we can tell from previous years, have recently adopted a far more corporate manner themselves; their texts are couched in mercantilist terms, with rather (how can one define it?) totalitarian-sounding pages of plaudits for the fair from gallerists. Perhaps this is a consequence of market conditions, which last year they described as 'challenging', and where, we infer, purchasing power still survives among the corporate sector rather than with individuals. In targeting this constituency, galleries, not that they needed much encouragement to do so, have to restrict their spectrum. They are marketing to clients who wish, firmly and discreetly, to advert to their cultural awareness, but do not want that to distract from the negotiations and the deal; in effect, they want self-effacing art, before which they can perform. It is not exactly wallpaper, but occupies, to use the term employed in Kant's third Critique, *parergonal* status, it is *para* ('around'), the real *ergon* ('work'), or as he defines it: 'only an adjunct, not an intrinsic constituent in the complete representation of the object' (1978: 57). The representation in question here would be, rather than the work itself, that of the work's owner. It serves as a metaphorical 'selfie'.

As a result, we began to feel a Borges-like sensation that we were wandering through a never-ending foyer of a bank or financial concern, right down to the

immaculate and bored receptionists. This was not something we felt here a few years ago, when the variety and richness of work was far more conspicuous. Strange things begin to happen to one's viewing habits in such surroundings. Pieces that one might barely have noticed become far more salient: a small head by Adrian Ghenie (arguably one of the most original of living artists), a study of vegetation by Hurvin Anderson (shortlisted for this year's Turner), even two paintings by Cecily Brown, to whom neither of us normally respond. They at least had some life. Sculpture by Nick Cave (no, not that one) exhibited a kind of



Nick Cave. *Soundsuit*. 2017. In Art Basel Fair. Photo: Susan Broadhurst.



Barbara Kruger. *Untitled (Our people are better than your people)*, 1994/2017. In Art Basel Project Space. Photo: Susan Broadhurst.

post-surrealist vitality. If memory is any index of quality, then a stark self-portrait masturbating by Frankfurt based Anne Imhof probably had the most presence. We wonder if any bank would be interested in it, or failing that, a Hollywood producer?

The 'Unlimited' project space next door presented a far more ostensibly heterogenous array of installations and sculpture, but even here there was a persistent dryness and limitation of technique which made most of it forgettable. Phyllida Barlow and Carl Andre, amongst others, were exceptions to a plethora of often photography-based installations which exuded a didactic, alienating force-field. Again, a preoccupation with select narrative themes has appeared to oppress artists' inventive powers, if they ever had them. Where these shackles were absent as in Donna Huanca's live performance of weirdly orgiastic dimensions, the results were far more engaging.

Basel this year was an example of what can be lost when the MBA graduates colonise the running of a polyvalent event like a fair. With their unquestioned and myopic concentration on quantifiable jargon-bound 'metrics' of success, they seem unable to recognise the predictable, banal effects which the exclusive pursuit of these brings. A fair like Basel needs the restoration of fun, at least some of which could be found at LISTE, the younger galleries' fair in an old brewery down the road. But fun takes imagination, which such corporatoids find very difficult to quantify and therefore to acquire.

Venice: An Unfulfilled Promise

We stand in the courtyard of a late-Renaissance palace, looking through Veronese-like arcades to the entrance *loggia*, drinking prosecco and munching nibbles, whilst a procession of figures, each wearing a face mask of an image of luxuriantly hairy labia, very slowly descend the staircase, enter the court, raise their arms, and then recede back to where they came. It could only be Venice. This was Orlan's contribution to one of the small collateral events that make the Biennale so richly diverse, 'Body and Soul— Past and Present', a survey of post-war performance art held near the Accademia bridge.



Orlan. *Masks (Maschere)*, 2017. In Palazzo Pisani. Photo: Susan Broadhurst.



Orlan. *Masks (Maschere)*, 2017. In Palazzo Pisani. Photo: Susan Broadhurst.

This year's Biennale (May–November 2017) adopted as its thematic title *Viva Arte Viva (Long Live Living Art)*. In the press materials its French curator, Christine Macel encouragingly declared:

Art is the ultimate ground for reflection ... the last bastion, a garden to cultivate above and beyond trends and personal interests ... an unequivocal alternative to individualism and indifference ... *VIVA ARTE VIVA* is ... a passionate outcry for art and the state of the artist ... a Biennale designed with artists, by artists and for artists.' (*Viva Arte Viva*, 2017)

Paolo Baratta, the Biennale President, characterised its tendency as that of 'humanism' which 'through art, celebrates mankind's ability to avoid powers ... [which] if left to their own devices, can greatly affect the human dimension, in a detrimental sense ... the artistic act is contemporaneously *an act of resistance, of liberation* and of *generosity*' (*Viva Arte Viva*, 2017).

These brave and refreshing words, so far from the accountant-speak mentioned above, represent that welcome disdain which the Biennale intermittently shows for its commercial counterparts. After the mercifully concise press launch in London, we had high hopes; alas, they were largely not fulfilled.

The Biennale falls into three divisions: the aforementioned Collateral Events (this year) freelance projects loosely under its aegis; 86 National Pavilions displaying work selected by each country's cultural apparatus (including the Giardini and across the City); and the curated show occupying the Central Pavilion and the old Arsenale halls (120 artists). There are also the independent shows which congregate in any premises going in the hope of catching attention (there are firms offering to organise these).

The theme chosen by the Biennale may sometimes be vaguely cited by the first two of these divisions but it does not determine selection very strongly. Consequently, there is often a sharp difference between the curated show and the others. To take the former first: Macel grouped her selected artists (103 of whom exhibiting in the Biennale for the first time) into nine themed 'pavilions'.

The titles sounded intriguing; amongst others: 'Shamans', 'The Dionysian', 'Time and Infinity', which she claimed were inferred from her selections and not criteria for making them. But the work within them was, on the whole, some of the most aridly anthropological we have seen at any Biennale. There seemed to be a



Liu Jianhua. *Square*, 2014. In Arsenale Halls. Photo: Susan Broadhurst.

syndrome of perfunctory graphics, somewhat unambitious constructions, wearying video documentary loops, vitrine-enclosed remnants (which another show would exploit, as we will see), all evincing a puritanical rejection of sensory response, all demanding some kind of textual exegesis. Much of this was work selected under the influence of curatorial *deformation professionelle*, work that was merely the physical trigger of the real interest, its catalogue entry. One feels sad to say this, because her intentions seemed so laudable, but Macel, who seemed far more verbose than previous curators, was in thrall to the content-led aesthetic positions alluded to above. When that content is, to use the old Derridean shorthand, recalcitrantly logocentric, then the eye is forgotten entirely. There were some welcome oases of visual interest in the Main Pavilion: instance the late John Latham and some Soutinsque work from the late Marwan, a Syrian based in Germany, but they were few.

Many of the National Pavilions were forgettable in other ways. The overwhelming prevalence of photography and installation may not of itself be a bad thing, but there seemed once more to be a desiccated lack of imagination as regards new modes of sensory display. We vividly remember one of the best Biennales of recent years, in 2009, where digital resources were exploited in various and even lunatic ways. One could add by way of comparison that then the narrative content of many pavilions was unashamedly dark, to the point of some kind of historical self-excoriation. Not so this year; the address was often towards some easy transnational post-Pop, stylistically adjacent to the vernacular of Basel. Otherwise, there seemed to be a self-conscious retreat into a kitschy national chauvinism, instance the Chinese pavilion.

There were, however, places where something more was being attempted. Zad Moultaqa, for Lebanon, transformed an Arsenale hall into an audio-visual *Gesamtkunstwerk* dramatizing the ancient Near East. And following a similar tendency to blend visual art with some other activity or performance, the US and Germany gave interesting examples. Mark Bradford, from a poor background, has developed an original technique of creating large abstract works by sanding into

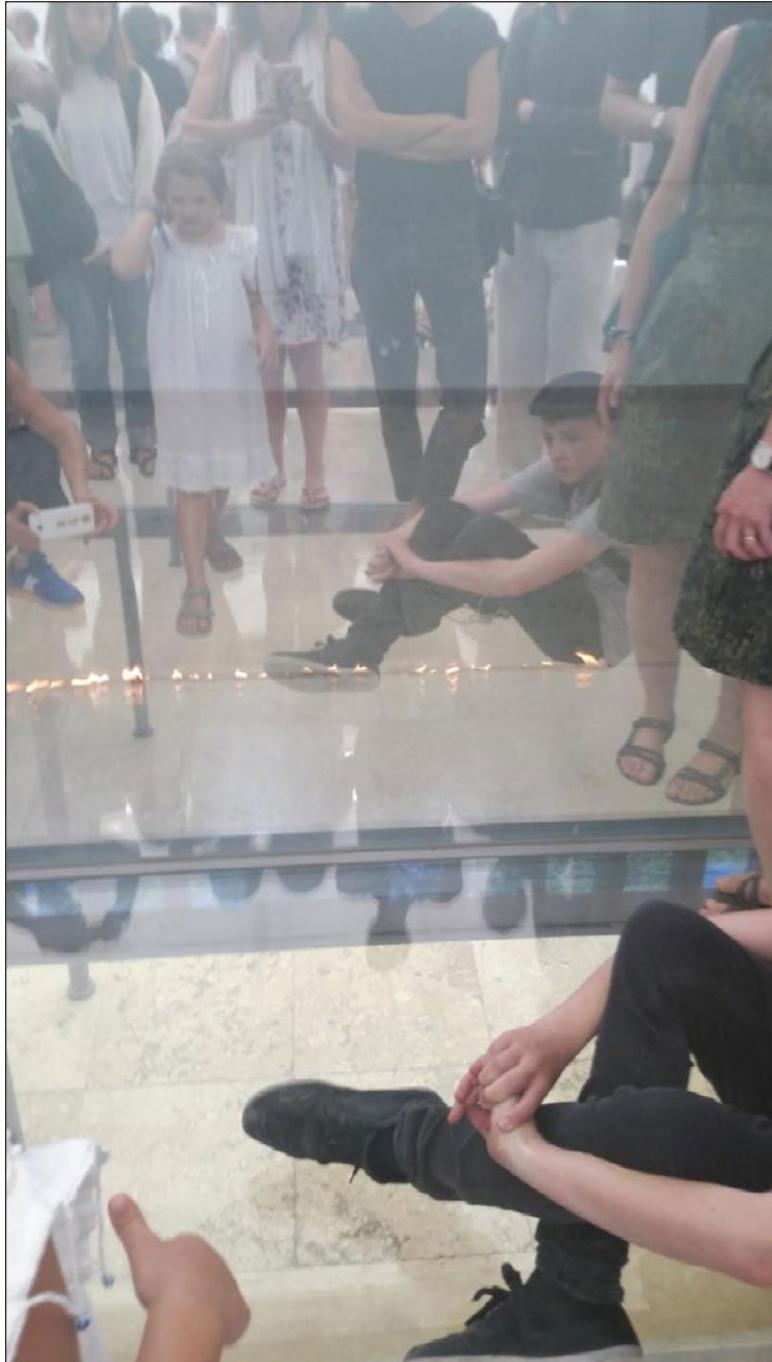
glued-together strata of coloured paper, but his show was supplemented by a quite Ruskinian cooperative project to provide artisanal opportunities to ex-offenders in Venice.

Anne Imhof, who seems rapidly heading to be Europe's next coolest thing, won the *Leone d'Oro* with a show combining painting, sculpture, performance (humans and a dog) and a transparent false floor, entitled *Faust*. One could say it had presence (and a spot of onanism, as in Basel); thankfully one did not have to read the prolix press release to appreciate that.

For the first time, a Diaspora pavilion, located in the city, exhibited 19 artists who identify as migrant or trans-national. This small show, curated by a very London-based forum, gained prominence for the tragic reason that Khadija Saye, a contributing photographer, has since died in the Grenfell fire. It was an intriguing collection of essays in what could be called 'post-colonial baroque', though it has to be said that this idiom is itself already firmly rooted in university-led curation; it is no longer, in the UK at least, counter-cultural.



Mark Bradford. *Go Tell It on the Mountain*, 2016. Photo: Neil Harvey.



Anne Imhof. *Faust*, 2017. In German Pavilion, Giardini. Photo: Susan Broadhurst.



Anne Imhof. *Faust*, 2017. In German Pavilion, Giardini. Photo: Susan Broadhurst.

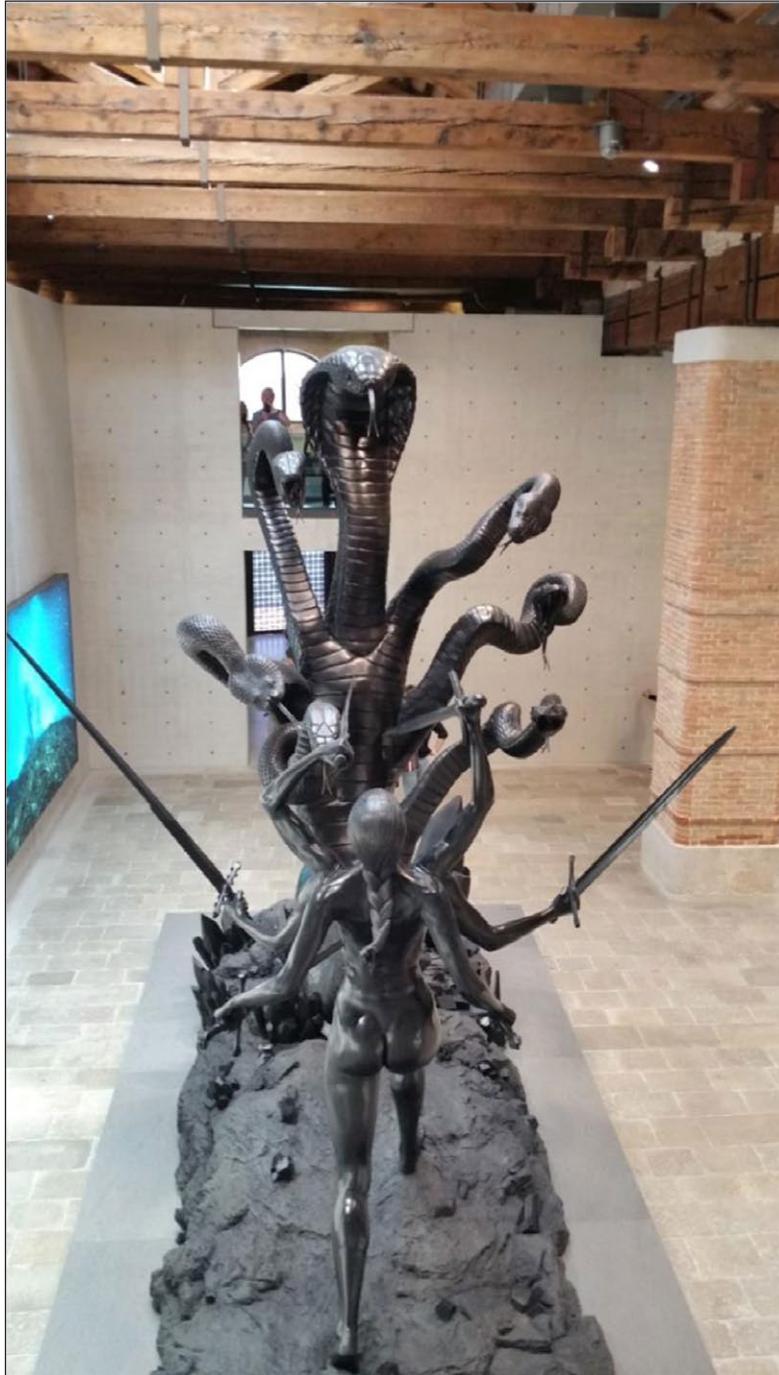
The imaginative restrictions of the mainstream displays were rather shown up by the Hyperpavilion, in the Arsenale, a collateral show produced by Fabulous Inc., an international group of software directors working in performing arts. The participants were clearly professional technicians with a sense of what a visual array could achieve. Although some of the tropes were probably too much indebted to gaming to have originality, this was, refreshingly, work of and for the eye. The general paucity of painting was to some extent compensated by another collateral, the multi-venue show *Personal Structures – open borders*, containing over 200 celebrated and obscure artists, somewhat chaotically curated by an Italian team for the European Cultural Centre, and of a vitality and stylistic variety that was often impressive. From them, with no claim to be comprehensive, we recall the succinct monumentality of Xenia Hausner's paintings, and the superlative skill of an under-recognised contemporary of Duane Hansen, the sculptor Carole A. Feuerman.

The Biennale is, of course, remarkable for its human fauna. As Baratta remarked at the London press launch, he discharges some obligation to the hoteliers of Venice in putting on a well-attended show. And so the diversity of press, dealers, academics, curators of no fixed abode, what used to be called 'Eurotrash', and shady people who eternally tour sunny places in 'yachts' the size of cruisers, all fetch up here for the hierarchy of openings. This sort of congregation was precisely the target of the show whose opening shrewdly just preceded that of the Biennale, Damien Hirst's *Treasures from the Wreck of the Unbelievable*, held at the Pinault Foundation's venues.

This has been reviewed to death, suffice to say that it would have been gracious to have acknowledged by name and within the show the myriad craftspeople who created the artefacts; the fictional pretext (a device already used by the Chapmans and Grayson Perry) was so thin and inconsistently articulated that it was hardly worth maintaining. As regards the contents, their quality varied greatly according to the skills of those who made them. As for the general effect, well, Hirst might have caught the *zeitgeist* exactly: if Donald Trump could curate a show, this would be it. In a sense this circus stood at an extreme polarity to the arid curatorialism of much



Image from series of photographs: *Dwelling: in this space we breathe*, 2017. Photo: Susan Broadhurst.



Hydra and Kali, 2017. Bronze, 526.5 × 611.1 × 341cm. Damien Hirst. Photo: Susan Broadhurst.



Hydra and Kali, Beneath the Waves, 2017. Damien Hirst. Photo: Susan Broadhurst.

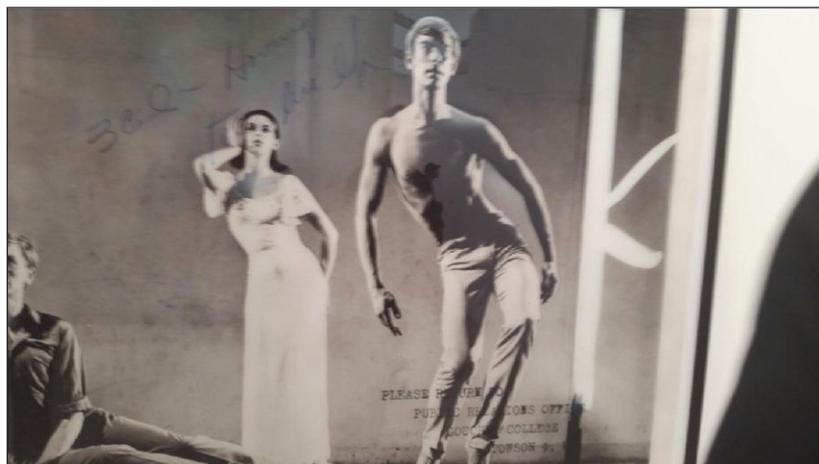
of the Biennale proper, and perhaps together they indicate an aesthetic version of the 'dissociation of sensibility' which T. S. Eliot long ago asserted to have afflicted literature. Art is phenomena *and* noumena, each necessary condition for giving meaning to the other. Spectacle and thought are interdependent.

London: The Self-Homogenizing Marquee

If Basel is at present greyly corporate, Frieze tries hard to be a social event. Begun in 2003 as a kind of secession from London's only contemporary art fair at the time (The London Art Fair), it presents an international manifold of galleries, initially mainly from Europe and the US but now quite global. Still (bizarrely) in its tented site in Regent's Park, Frieze has become the sort of marker on the upmarket calendar that the English media love. 'Frieze Week' has become as established as Ascot and Goodwood were for an older set, and Fashion Week is for a younger. The *Evening Standard*, unhealthy London's sole daily paper, fills out with the papped farties at the same old parties. Galleries co-ordinate openings to bathe in the attention. We are told that superrich buyers throng into town, (doubtless at least some intent on giving their money an autumnal clean). Since the Brexit referendum, the metropolitan movers and shakers are determined to be positive about London's future, and events such as Frieze, rather like a lavish *festa* in eighteenth century Venice, are clung to in the face of the city-state's probable decline.

Frieze is very keen to 'monetise' your attendance. The basic daily entry price (about £45 in 2017) can be augmented, Ryanair-style, with a list of add-ons, for Frieze Week events, Frieze Masters (the kind of historical work Basel integrates) and even the speedy-boarding VIP option. In contrast to Basel's courtyard concessions, Frieze offers 12 bars and eateries with a strong view to high spending. There were 149 galleries in the tent this year, although more than 60 of them were in small booths. This is about half the size of Basel, without even considering the latter's project space. Evidently the entry price is not proportionate.

As for the work, we find it difficult to write at length. Basel was certainly bland, but Frieze presented so many galleries all trying to offer the same kind of stuff. The homogeneity was as uncanny as it was depressing. This was not so when this fair started; whatever the work, it was at least diverse, or diversely bad. There are several recognisable corridors of genre: the aforementioned post-Pop; the 'degraded image' which can be stylistically triangulated between Tuymans, Dumas and Richter; the plenary field of inscriptions or doodles; the 'slack figuration', characterizable as a very lukewarm expressionism, which usually shouts its edifying narrative content. If there was work which remained conspicuous it was often photography; Thomas Ruff reappeared from gallery to gallery.



Untitled, Thomas Ruff. Photo: Susan Broadhurst.

Olafur Eliasson presented an interesting installation at Tanya Bonakdar, involving lenses and watercolours.



Four Deep Sea Zones, 2017. Olafur Eliasson. Photo: Susan Broadhurst.



The Hinged View, 2017. Olafur Eliasson. Photo: Susan Broadhurst.

Hauser and Wirth, following the trend of fanciful curation, commissioned Mary Beard to mix ancient and contemporary work in bronze in a show which unfortunately appeared as dry as a museum reserve. Gagosian exhibited (often rather historic) drawings without labels, presumably either in the spirit of 'if you don't know who, then you can't afford them' or to oblige you to ask the staff, thus initiating sales patter. But for the most part the exhibits receded in the mind to a state of indistinguishable background. At least Basel displayed a standard of craft, unambitious though it was; here scrappiness prevailed.



Hollywood Industrial Complex: Aperture Series, 2016. Doug Aitken. Photo: Susan Broadhurst.

What causes can be suggested for this seeming sameness? It seems likely that the target market remains as narrow as it is monied, and so is subject to very localised but powerful micro-fashions, reinforced by the advice of shadowy freelance curators. There seemed to be a tendency, compared to Basel, towards more and smaller scale painting, possibly implying that buyers were thought to be as much private as institutional. But I think that in determining this market galleries are blinkered by the same old creeping corporatism: desperate to maximise sales, obsessively checking each other out on the internet, devoid of imagination. More disturbingly, anecdotal evidence suggests that the internet itself is inducing artists immediately to homogenise production in what could be called 'flash fashions'. Perhaps all this is a consequence of how much galleries need to break even after the costs of participating, but in trying to ensure their income streams they have constricted their chances of discovering unexpected sales, and in this the corporatoid's addiction to predictable outcomes is dismally apparent. If we were discussing the necessities for survival such a disposition might be understandable; this fair, like its counterparts, pretends to cater for a luxury market, yet cannot luxuriate in the risk-taking behaviour such a market is meant to encourage.

Conclusion: Process Occludes Product

A decade ago an art dealer, in a moment of candour, remarked to one of us: 'people don't buy the work *per se*, they buy my endorsement of it'. He implicitly conceded that, like all forms of high-end retail, the trick is to make the buyer crave, and subsequently to feel privileged that they have gained, the approval of (and so in a sense, a permission to buy from) the seller. This in turn rests upon the seller securing a quasi-pedagogic advantage over the buyer, the former purports to *educate* the latter and praises their attainment even as they profit from them.

Such a devious commercial relation is a microcosm of the general subsuming, mentioned in our Introduction, of critical and museological functions into that of the market. Thus, the contemporary dealer is, in the manner of the post-eighties stock exchange, both principal of, that is creator of, and agent within, this same market, selling not only its products but constituting the values under which they are sold. The

events of 2008 have left financial analysts wary of the consequences of this conflation of roles; such reservations have yet to reach the art world, and why should they? If we can infer a rather bleak lesson from Venice, it is that contemporary curatorial positions are simply not robust or fruitful enough to posit any significant resistance to this process. Whilst these are mired in preoccupations with identity and narrative they are merely supplying a stock of backstories to fill out the salesman's patter to the client. They cannot of themselves induce a selection of work which presents a compelling challenge to marketisable mediocrity. As recent talk of tech industries' 'disruptors' indicates, capitalism is good at posing as its own enemy, thereby maintaining its value system under a new guise. As long as it remains such, the worthiest content will never truly 'disrupt' the art market; it will usually facilitate it.

Are there any signs of a stronger aesthetic position emerging? It is beyond the scope of this review to attempt an answer. But we conclude by pointing to the fallacy that might prevent this emergence. Amongst the mags and flyers thrust at one at these fairs was *The Collectors Chronicle*, featuring an interview with the founder of a database for putative collectors which 'monitors artists by assigning algorithmically calculated points to each of them' (incidentally, the use of such 'metrics' is reported to be increasing in grant-awarding contexts too). Obviously, sensitive to the charge that this reduces collecting to visually indifferent investing, he continues: 'It is ... not our intention to assess the intellectual or aesthetic quality of an artist's work. We draw a ... career path out of an artist's exhibition history because we believe that art history is an expression of exhibition history' (Claassen, back cover, 2017). That last clause discloses the collapsing of what is by definition retrospectively researched and composed, into a bare enumerating of public shows. If this reduction had been applied to the later nineteenth and earlier twentieth century then our understanding of Modernism and its precursors would have been wildly distorted. An art history founded on such a criterion would ignore any theoretical stances, any polemic, indeed, any artistic activity which remained obscure, no matter how important these might subsequently appear. We conclude as we began: this is the underscoring problem of the art fair: it pretends to a comprehension which it cannot achieve, and which can only be reached by those above and beyond it.

Competing Interests

Susan Broadhurst is an editor of BST. Reviews are not refereed and the submissions section is open to all and no favourable treatment was received on this submission.

Neil Harvey has no competing interests.

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