

Venice Biennale

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by MARTHA BARRATT

CHRISTINE MACEL, THE curator of the 57th Venice Biennale (to 26th November), promised ‘a passionate outcry for art and the state of the artist’, an artist-led declaration with themes ranging from Dionysus and shamans to colour and infinity. Since 2000, when Macel founded the Centre Pompidou’s department for contemporary and ‘prospective’ art, she has championed young artists and those working in new and inter-media forms, including performance and sound art. But if Okwui Enwezor’s Biennale exhibition of two years ago opened with a bang – Abel Abdessemed’s knife sculptures illuminated by Bruce Naumann’s sadomasochistic neons¹ – Macel’s contribution is decidedly muffled, as the exhibition meanders through the spaces of the Giardini and Arsenale, a far cry from the vigour and energy promised by this year’s title, *Viva Art Viva!*

A lack of clarity, it seems, may be intentional. Macel aims to tell a ‘story that is often discursive and at times paradoxical with detours that mirror the world’s complexities.’² This somewhat baffling ambition is reflected in the thematic organisation of the show into nine ‘pavilions’ (loosely defined divisions within the gallery spaces), which include ‘Artists and Books’, ‘Joys and Fears’ and ‘the Common’.

The last mentioned, and most cohesive, of these sections looks at how art is used to build community, drawing heavily on Macel’s aim to include work made in the 1960s and 1970s as a (failed) example for artists today. The appeal of the earlier generation’s participatory work – anarchy, surrealism, collaboration, ritual freed from modern social convention – is encapsulated in a film of the performance *Rituel en quatre couleurs* in Paris in 1971 by the artists Antoni Miralda, Dorothee Selz, Joan Rabascall and Jaume Xifra (cat. pp.198–201; Fig.80). People dressed in red, yellow, green or blue capes and masks process through fields before reaching a feast of non-earthly foods dyed polychrome; a guest may eat and drink only that which matches their garb. Visually splendid, children raise forks of green spaghetti, masked hosts dressed in white proffer kaleidoscopic platters of biscuits and groups gather around luminous bottles of drink, giving the assembly the sunny and familial air of a carnival or summer fête. Such enjoyment of communal creation is also evident in Maria Lai’s video of the performance *Legarsi alla Montagna* (1981; pp.190–92), in which residents of her hometown, Ulassai, in Sardinia, weave a blue ribbon through the streets and across a nearby mountain. Lai’s playful and poetic community action is paired with a contemporary participatory work, Lee Mingwei’s sickly sweet and cringingly literal *The mending project* (pp.194–95). Visitors’ damaged gar-

ments are given to the artist to be ‘mended’ with colourful embroidery and tufts of loose thread ends, a handwritten, boutique-style label is attached, and the clothing set aside for collection by the visitor at the end of the day. The key difference is that while Lai’s project illustrates and works with a well established, real-world community, Lee’s is a temporary simulation involving Biennale visitors, who have no stake in that community apart from the product they have temporarily deposited there and the ‘added value’ the artist will give to it. Participation is here inseparable from consumption. While such art in the 1960s and 1970s may have resounded with the optimism of participatory radical politics, today the commodification (crowdfunding, micro-investment) and appropriation of collectivity and its actions by commercial interests (see the recent, jaw-dropping aping of protest for a Pepsi commercial), together with a perceived disconnect between direct action and politics, means the repetition of such gestures in contemporary art tends to fall flat.

The often failed attempts by art to construct communities, and the nostalgia for tradition this can reveal is, however, brilliantly addressed in *Atrato*, a film by Marcos Avila Forero (2014; pp.214–15), in which he works with a group of young Afro-Colombians in the conflict-riven Chocó forest to revive the native tradition of river drumming. Both the images and the rhythms made by these bodies slapping the Atrato’s flowing water is mesmeric when they are in time. But mostly they are not. Mostly the group is trying to learn, arguing over technique, frustrated and bored, wandering off or pausing to watch the river traffic (the peace interrupted intermittently by gunfire). Artifice is all: the attempt

to revive a tradition is not a simulation, but rather an expression of the loss of and desire for a stable community.

Elsewhere in the exhibition, sewing and craft reappear in an installation by Sheila Hicks (pp.460–63), a wall of what look like giant balls of wool, and in a much more refined manner by Franz Erhard Walther, whose canary-yellow fabric-objects, which lie between sculpture and clothing, are ‘activated’ periodically throughout the exhibition in performances (pp.222–23). Franz West’s bed introduces another rather vague theme of ‘activity and idleness’ (pp.46–49), and may explain the young woman asleep in the first room of the Giardini. ‘Activity’ is represented by Olafur Eliasson’s bustling ‘workshop’, in which a number of refugees earn a wage by making lamps to the artist’s design under the approving eyes of Biennale visitors. But this exchange – an example of the art-as-social-enterprise that has clung to contemporary art since the 1990s – breeds unease. Despite the artist’s best intentions, it is difficult to find the art or politics in putting vulnerable migrants on display making luxury goods for one of the world’s most commercially successful artists.

The generally underwhelming central display did, however, allow the exceptional work in the national pavilions to stand out more fully. Of these, the most successful presentations are – with the exception perhaps of Geoffrey Farmer’s brilliantly surprising ‘fountain’ erupting through the half-demolished Canadian pavilion – produced by female artists. This is especially worth mentioning because a number of the pavilions attempt to correct histories of art that have tended to overlook their female protagonists.



80. *Rituel en quatre couleurs*, by Antoni Miralda, Dorothee Selz, Joan Rabascall and Jaume Xifra. 1971. Video still of performance (courtesy Filmoteca de Catalunya, Barcelona; exh. Arsenale, Venice).

The Swiss contribution, *Women of Giacometti*, for example, included a documentary film by Teresa Hubbard and Alexander Birchard that traces the extraordinary life of Flora Mayo, who left a marriage and daughter in the United States to pursue a career in sculpture in Paris in the 1920s, where she met Giacometti. Her letters and photographs (undisturbed until recently in her son's house) show the couple's intense intellectual and artistic bond, redressing her marginal status as Giacometti's one-time lover who died unknown as an artist in Midwest America.

Other countries have chosen to exhibit the work of mature female artists who have only later in life achieved international prominence, a stance also taken by Macel in her choice of Carolee Schneemann (b.1939), whose first full-scale retrospective was held only in 2014,³ for this year's lifetime achievement award. The British pavilion was filled to bursting with the towering sculptures typical of Phyllida Barlow (b.1944), monumental in scale but crafty in construction, like papier-mâché stage sets coloured with whatever was at hand: lipstick, felt-tip pen, spray paint. Her title, *Folly*, is ever so British, both in reference to that nation's penchant for insubstantial garden architecture and for the jolly, foolish self-importance that characterised last year's referendum on Brexit. For Romania, a perfect, miniature exhibition of the work of Geta Brătescu (b.1926) includes a series of drawings, *Mothers* (1997) that evoke the 'terrifying massiveness' of 'form-



82. Eliza Douglas and Lea Welsch in *Faust*, by Anne Imhof. 2017. Photograph of performance. (Courtesy the artist; photograph Nadine Fraczkowski; exh. German Pavilion, Giardini, Venice).

generating mothers'.⁴ A more direct feminist message (Brătescu refuses to define herself as a feminist) comes from the fierce video installation *Tremble Tremble* by Ireland's Jesse Jones (Fig.81).⁵ A primordial giantess has digested legal texts from medieval times and spits out a response in threatening folk songs: 'I HOPES I DISTURB YE', 'I'LL PUSH AND PULL THIS COURTHOUSE TO CINDERS BY A BLOOD FULL MOON'. The giantess, projected against black curtains, peers down accusingly at the viewer,

or dances in an ecstatic rage between bursts of throaty admonishments.

It is exactly this vitality and challenge that is missing from Macel's presentation, and which is perhaps why Anne Imhof's bleak and violent five-hour-long performance, *Faust*, for the German pavilion, was such a deserving winner for the Golden Lion (Fig.82).⁶ As two dobermans stroll the perimeter, unsmiling but handsome long-limbed young men and women crouch on high ledges and crawl underneath the audience, who are suspended above on a glass floor. They slap, whip and hose down one other, light fires and watch them burn out, and fight in brutal slow motion. It is almost teenaged in its aestheticisation of melancholy, like a 'heroin chic' fashion shoot from the 1990s. But also teenaged is the sheer desire and angst, in equal measure, that the piece is able to express. Rather than attempting to revive a hippy-era belief in the power of participation, as Macel did in her exhibition, Imhof offers a cathartic, stripped down and violent performance of our contemporary condition. In *Faust*, despite its deadpan aesthetics, Macel's search for a 'passionate outcry' is best answered.

81. Film still from *Tremble Tremble*, by Jesse Jones. 2017. Installation, dimensions variable (courtesy the artist; exh. Ireland Pavilion, Arsenale, Venice).



¹ See the review by the present author in this Magazine, 157 (2015), pp.652–55.

² Catalogue: *Biennale Art 2017. VIVA ARTE VIVA*. By Christine Macel. 2 vols. 588 + 256 pp. incl. numerous col. ills. (La Biennale di Venezia, Venice, 2017), £80. ISBN 978-0-8478-6115-6.

³ It was reviewed by the present author in this Magazine, 158 (2016), pp.230–32.

⁴ Catalogue: *Apparitions: Geta Brătescu*. Edited by Magda Radu and Diane Ursan. 264 pp. incl. numerous col. ills. (Koenig Books, London, 2017), £16. ISBN 978-3-96098-140-4.

⁵ Catalogue: *Jesse Jones: Tremble Tremble*. Edited by Tessa Giblin, with contributions by the author, Silvia Federici, Lisa Godson and Tina Kinsella. 256 pp. incl. numerous col. ills. (Mousse Publishing, Milan, 2017), €18. ISBN 978-88-6749-268-8.

⁶ Catalogue: *Anne Imhof: Faust*. 188 pp. incl. numerous col. ills. (Koenig Books, London, 2017), €29.80. ISBN 978-3-96098-170-1 (English); 978-3-96098-166-4 (German).