

ARTFORUM

DIARY

PERSONS OF INTEREST

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Ralph Rugoff and Paulo Barrata.

INTERESTING. Few words have such angular ambiguity, signifying both a viewer's interpretive generosity while subtly acknowledging that the thing in question just might not be that good. Ralph Rugoff, the artistic director of the fifty-eighth Venice Biennale, which opened Tuesday to select press and professionals, played on the word's double meaning in the title for his show, "May You Live in Interesting Times," a phrase attributed as an "ancient

Chinese curse,” but, like, the Ivanka Trump/fortune cookie variety, with no actual “ancient” or “Chinese.” The dash of Orientalism was either snarkily intentional from the start, or simply reclaimed as snarkily intentional after news of the title riled tempers east of the Urals.

So how’s the exhibition itself?

Interesting.

Rugoff has packed his show of roughly eighty artists with whizzbang Instagrams-in-waiting, through an eclectic survey of exclusively living artists that felt more like someone had emptied Chelsea and the Lower East Side (the new, tonier one, not the one from seven years ago) into the Giardini’s Central Pavilion. But after a day of mulling it over, I decided this zeitgeist approach could be a throwback to the biennial’s days as a salon rather than a definitive statement on our life and times. Rugoff might argue that this is his point: In an age of “fake news” and myriad malleable perspectives, consensus is no longer possible. Even his exhibition is divided in two, with Proposition A in the Arsenale and Proposition B in the Giardini.

In the absence of a strong thesis or even a clear curatorial vision, what we get is call and response. A grid in an Avery Singer work sails smoothly over a sculpture by Carol Bove to match the lattice on the back of a chair in a Njideka Akunyili Crosby painting. Got it. Who doesn’t love an inexplicable migration of forms? But this pattern of simple “like” meets “like” can go wrong, too. Halil

Altindere's *Space Refugee* project, which looks into the fascinating story of Syrian astronaut Muhammed Ahmed Faris, is coupled with Dominique Gonzalez-Foerster's dispiriting diorama *Cosmorama*, because, well, Mars. In a central chamber, Julie Mehretu's new abstractions are juxtaposed with portraits by Henry Taylor and George Condo because . . . painting? And the violence conjured by Frida Orupabo's cutout figures and memorialized by Teresa Margolles with a wall removed from a school in Juárez is caricatured by a set of Christian Marclay screenprints and a giant robot mopping bloodlike goo by Sun Yuan and Peng Yu.



Miracle Workers Collective curators Christopher Wessels, Giovanna Esposito Yussif and Bonaventure Soh Bejeng Ndikung with artist historian Salah M. Hassan.

Throughout the main show, there's a refreshing diversity, free of any particular critical lens. There is a preponderance of images of people of color (or, in the case of Arthur Jafa's spellbinding *The White Album*, pink people), including in some of the show's best works. (I had a hard time tearing myself away from video works by Khalil Joseph and Stan Douglas.) But the lack of a strong political throughline can also be troubling. In a sure-to-make-headlines maneuver, Christoph Büchel parked a recovered fishing boat on the shores of the Arsenale. This same ship left Tripoli in April 2015 only to sink in the Mediterranean Sea, taking with it over eight hundred would-be migrants. "Raising awareness," "starting a conversation"—there are plenty of amenable euphemisms for this piece, but the reality is, Büchel succeeds in serving up these people's terrible deaths as a backdrop for selfies on the way to yet another Bellini. (#Venice #VeniceBiennale #Bellinis #ArtLife #LoveMyLife #SoSadforMigrants #InterestingTimes.)

Anyway, on to the national pavilions. At the top of everyone's list this year is Ghana, which debuted with a mini-biennial of a group show by powerhouse curator Nana Oforiatta-Ayim. Admittedly, my first response to this mighty roster—works by El Anatsui, Ibrahim Mahama, Felicia Abban, Lynette Yiadom-Boakye, and Selasi Awusi Sosu, topped off with a fresh stunner from John Akomfrah, all installed in a pavilion designed by David Adjaye—was "slow your roll, Ghana! Save something for next time." Emerging from the

Akomfrah, however, what could I want but more? Perhaps no accident, the Ghana Pavilion was advised by the late, great Okwui Enwezor, who directed the Biennale's 2015 edition and whose indomitable spirit still lingers over the city. (Was I the only one who heard his belly laugh outside the Danieli?)

Other favorites for the Golden Lion included Martin Puryear's contribution to the US, "Liberty," a mature and fully realized mix of material confidence, historic insight, and spatial authority. I marveled at how light and airy Cathy Wilkes made the British Pavilion feel, then caught sight of Delfina Foundation's Aaron Cezar ducking furtively behind the French Pavilion. Cezar is behind the Biennale's low-key performance program, and thus probably more in the know than anyone, so naturally I followed in pursuit, only to be stopped in my tracks by a beautiful young man, who looked me up and down, then chuckled: "It would be better to come by elephants, eh?" A clear sign I was about to have An Artistic Experience. From a live dove swooning over a glass pigeon to a waifish dancer casually shimmying through the crowd to a tunnel purportedly being dug to the British Pavilion, Laure Prouvost's grotto of a French Pavilion riffs on sociologist Zygmunt Bauman's concept of "liquid modernity." Apparently, the roof-mounted fog machine had to be switched off after it threatened havoc on Stanislav Kolíbal's streamlined reliefs next door at the Czech Republic and Slovak Republic Pavilion. (Fans of fake fog, take heart, as Lara Favaretto sent another artificial mist from the entrance to the Central Pavilion.) All in all, France's pavilion certainly had a lot of swagger, but as for substance, the only thing clear was that Prouvost and her video's photogenic cast are more self-actualized than the rest of us.



Scenes from Laure Provost's French Pavilion.

The push against nationalist narratives could be felt all around the Giardini. For Germany, Natascha Sadr Haghghian presented under the pseudonym Natascha Süder Happelmann, a Teutonic twist on her name that nods to nationalist expectations and sloppy publicists. Canada is represented by the Inuit initiative Isuma, which gives a voice to the First Nations people on the continuing encroachment and exploitation of their land by . . . Canada. In Finlandia (now edited to just read “LAND”), a parade of Sámi walking sticks by Outi Pieski preceded the Miracle Workers Collective joint collection of

short films, *The Killing of Čáhcerávga*. And in perhaps the strongest statement of all, the Venezuela Pavilion was simply closed.

Gender is frequently in the foreground, and not just in Austria, where Renate Bertlmann's spunky *Discordo Ergo Sum* ("I dissent, therefore I am") tended a garden of rose-tipped knives aimed at the patriarchy. The Saudi Pavilion featured Jeddah-based artist Zahrah Al Ghamdi in a show curated by Eiman Elgibreen. "*Two women* are behind the Saudi Pavilion," Alia Al-Senussi told me at the Art Basel cocktail. "You have no idea how hard they must have worked to pull that off." It was also an all-woman affair in Korea, another of the potential Lion Contenders. The agile curator Hyunjin Kim brought together video works by siren eun young jung, Hwayeon Nam, and Jane Jin Kaisen in an installation that wrapped skillfully around the pavilion and into the garden, where Nam had planted hydrangeas, among other plants brought from home. Angelica Mesiti brought her "Assembly" to Australia, Larissa Sansour delivered a solid Danish Pavilion, and I heard rousing things about Pauline Boudry and Renate Lorenz at the Swiss Pavilion, (Unfortunately there was an issue with the projection while I was there. "Is the image supposed to be static?" I texted a friend. "Definitely not," she shot back.) There were no such snags at the exuberant Brazil Pavilion, where Bárbara Wagner and Benjamin de Burca's "Swinguerra" (an amalgam of *guerra* and the dance movement *swingueira*) filled the Giardini's "other half" with an infectious beat that felt as "of the moment" as anything I'd seen.



Brazil Pavilion curator Gabriel Pérez-Barreiro and artists Bárbara Wagner and Benjamin de Burca.

That evening the social rigmarole began in earnest, with Marian Goodman cocktails at the Fortuny gardens and showroom; a garden party at the Hotel Metropole for the Office for Contemporary Art Norway and the Nasjonalmuseet; and dinners for Ian Cheng, Antoine Catala, and Anicka Yi hosted by Gladstone, Pilar Corrias, and 47 Canal; Adrian Ghenie by Thaddaeus Ropac; Martine Gutierrez by Ryan Lee; Neïl Beloufa presented by Kamel Mennour, Mendes Wood DM, François Ghebaly, and ZERO at the

Palazzo Tiepolo; and Pablo Vargas, at the Palazzo Mocenigo Casa Nuova, hosted by Labor Gallery's ebullient Pamela Echeverria, who had brought with her the world-renowned chefs behind Cosme, Enrique Olvera and Daniela Soto-Innes. Everyone had recommendations: Lithuania's ambitious indoor opera set on an artificial beach in the never-before-used Marina Militare or the come-hither grotesqueries of Kris Lemsalu at the Estonian Pavilion. Charlotte Prodger's coming-of-age video at the Scotland for Venice exhibition. Joan Jonas was once more the talk of the Biennale with a sweeping exhibition at the newly inaugurated Ocean Space. Cocksure surveys of Luc Tuymans at the Palazzo Grassi and of Jannis Kounellis at the Fondazione Prada. And the Psychiatric Hospital Museum of San Servolo is bringing various symposia, including one on gender and sexual outlaws—part of Shu Lea Cheang's Taiwan Pavilion, curated by the philosopher and activist Paul B. Preciado—and another hosted by the Association of Neuroesthetics as part of SAVVY Contemporary's yearlong project "Ultrasanity: On Madness, Sanitation, Antipsychiatry and Resistance," which invites artists and neurologists to mediate on "madness" as both a tool for discrimination and a strategy for the evasion of social restrictions.

On the subject of madness, this morning, I took a break from writing to witness the flyover of the world's largest jet, advertised by the Open Group as part of the Ukrainian Pavilion. The intention was to have the plane cast literal shade across the entire Giardini. The overcast sky seemed to obviate any shadows, and yet, magically, just before noon the skies cleared and I dashed outside, camera in hand, to Viale Garibaldi, craning my neck at the sound of

every passing motorboat or roller bag. After fifteen minutes, it was official: I am still not very good at telling fact from fiction.

— Kate Sutton



Artist Koo Jeong-A and curator Hans-Ulrich Obrist.



Artist Shubigi Rao and curator Antonia Majaca.



Artists Rachel Rose and Ian Cheng.



Australian Pavilion artist Angelica Mesiti and curator Juliana Engberg.



Canadian Pavilion artist, Lucy Tulugarjuk, representative of Isuma.



Critic-curators Theodor Ringborg and Adam Kleinman at the OCA Nasjonalmuseet reception at the Metropole.



Croatian Pavilion artist Igor Grubić and curator Katerina Gregos.



Curator Amal Khalaf with artists Monira Al Qadiri, Cecile B Evans, and Yuri Pattinson, and Joe Namy at The Wait.



Curator Boris Ondrejčka at Ocean Space.



Curator Christine Macel, French Pavilion curator Martha Kirszenbaum, and Venice Biennale Performance Program curator Aaron Cezar.



Curator Polina Dubik, Sasha Dubik and Venice Biennale artist Jon Rafman.



Curator Raluca Voinea.



Curators Cecilia Alemani and Massimiliano Gioni in the Arsenale.



Curators Hou Hanru and Evelyne Jouanno.



Curators Ivet Curlin, Igor Spanjol and Ana Janevski.



Danish Pavilion artist Larissa Sansour and curator Nat Muller.



Dealer Kamel Mennour in the Arsenale.



Dealer Pamela Echeverria with chefs Enrique Olvera and Daniela Soto-Innes.



Dealers Giulia Roberti and Lucy Chadwick.



Dealers Jose Kuri and Monica Manzutto.



Dealers Kourosh Nouri and Nadine Knotzer at the Art Basel cocktail.



Dealers Selvi May Akyildiz, Nicky Verber, Vanessa Carlos and Kendall Koppe with FIAC's Alex Meyers (second from right).



Finland Pavilion's artist Outi Pieski, part of the Miracle Workers Collective.



ICA at Virginia Commonwealth University executive director Dominic Willsdon with archivist Moriah Ulinskas at the Mexico Pavilion dinner.



Korean Pavilion curator Hyunji Kim (second from left) with artists Hwayeon Nam, Jane Jin Kaisen and siren eun young jung.



Magda Baltoyanni, Artemis Baltoyanni and Emma Astner.



Malta Pavilion artists Trevor Borg, Klitsa Antoniou and Vince Briffa.



Miggi Hood, Loren Muzzey (Sturtevant), Nicolas Trembley and Matthew Lutz-Kinoy.



OCA's Ingrid Moe with Nasjonalmuseet's Simen Helsvig at the Norwegian institution's joint reception at the Metropole.



Artist Georgia Sagri and curator Glykeria Stathopolou.



Artist Ivan Argote at the Art Basel cocktail.



Artist Gala Porras-Kim, Kadist's Marie Martraire, curator Xiaoyu Weng and dealer Young Chung at the Mexican Pavilion dinner.



Romanian Pavilion artist Belu-Simion Făinaru.



Serbian Pavilion artist Djordje Ozbolt.



steirischer herbst director Ekaterina Degot.



steirischer herbst's Christoph Platz and Henriette Gallus at the OCA
Nasjonalnuseet reception at the Metropole.



Tate Director Maria Balshaw inside the French Pavilion.



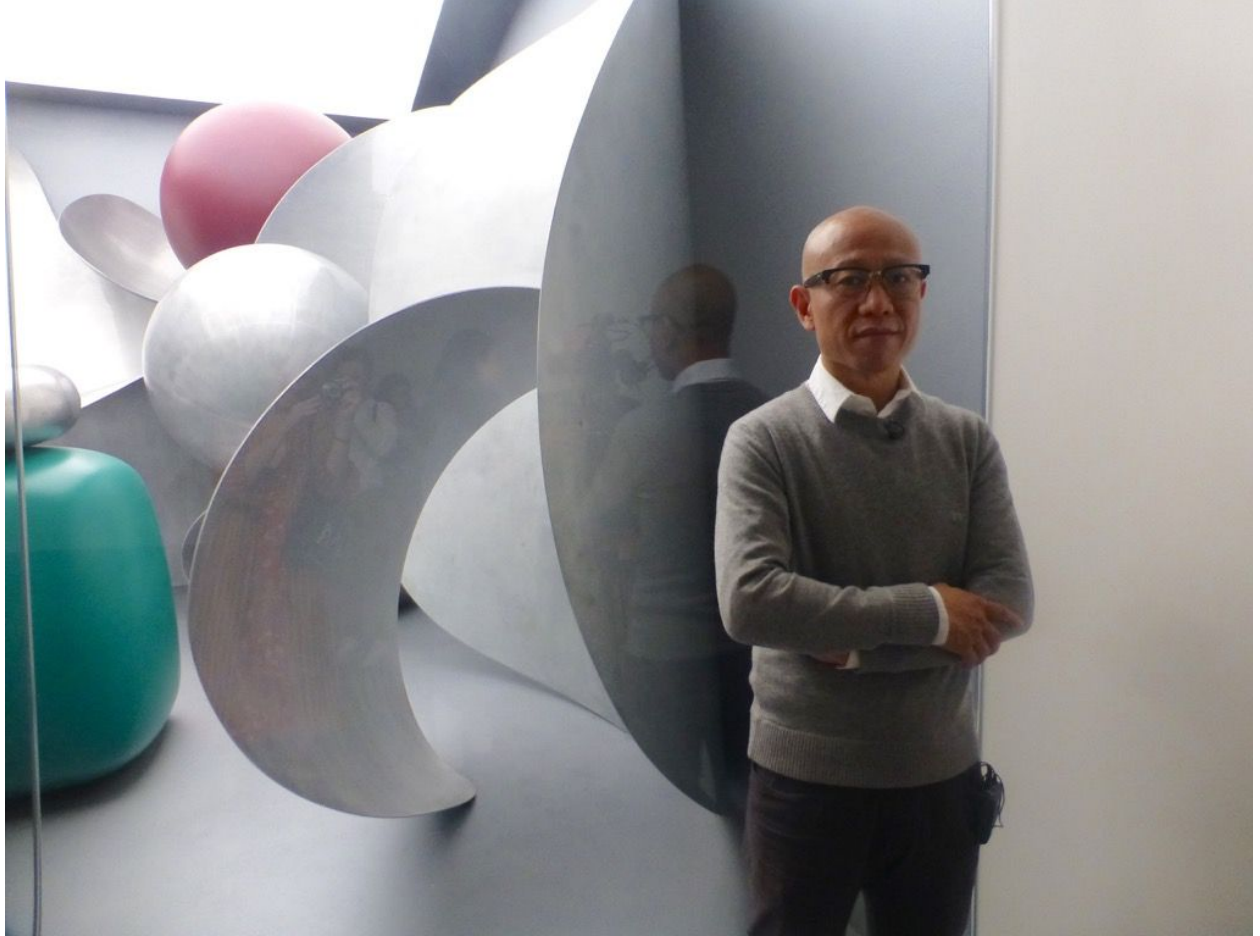
Ralph Rugoff, Venice Biennale artistic director.



UAE Pavilion's Laila Binbrek, curators Sam Bardaouil and Till Fellrath and artist Nujoom Alghanem (second from right).



Venice Biennale artist Augustas Serapinas in one of his Chairs for the Invigilator in the Arsenale.



Venice Biennale artist Liu Wei in the Arsenal.



Ralph Rugoff, Venice Biennale artistic director.



Venice Biennale artist Martine Gutierrez.



Venice Biennale artist Tarek Atoui with Julia Giertz.



Veronica Bellei with artist Monira Al Qadiri.



Victoria Miro's Glen Scott Wright with Art Basel's Noah Horowitz and Marc Spiegler at the Art Basel cocktail.



Austria Pavilion curator Felicitas Thun-Hohenstein and artist Renate Bertlmann.



Paolo Barrata, Venice Biennale president.