

# The New York Times

## Venice Biennale: Whose Reflection Do You See?

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“Wall Formation Yellow Modeling” by Franz Erhard Walther at the biennale, which is titled “Viva Arte Viva.”

**VENICE** — Timing isn’t everything, but it’s a lot. If the bland, soft-power 2017 Venice Biennale, called “Viva Arte Viva,” had arrived two, or four, or six years ago, it might have passed muster, even made sense. But coming post-Brexit and post-Trump, it feels almost perversely out of sync with the political moment, and nowhere near strong enough to define a moment of its own.

This is particularly disappointing as the main show, organized by Christine Macel, chief curator of the Pompidou Center in Paris, has promising features. It is not, for one thing, an off-the-rack gathering of market-vetted stars. Most of the 120 artists will be unfamiliar to even the most assiduous art world travelers. The ethnic spread is wide; the gender balance, even. Refreshingly, much of the art substitutes touch and texture for digital gloss.

Yet the show doesn't rise, doesn't cohere. Thematic tension and critical drive are missing. Ms. Macel has divided the work, installed in two vast spaces — in the Giardini and the Arsenale — into nine sections with snoozy, New Age-y titles: Pavilion of Joys and Fears, Pavilion of the Earth, Pavilion of Time and Infinity, etc. She even kicks the whole thing off, in the Giardini, with images of artists napping in their studios.

She's trying to make a point about downtime as dreamtime, a mode of passive-resistant creativity in an era of frantic, art fair-directed production. Unfortunately, the nodding-off image reinforces a second reality: the fact that the current market-addled mainstream art world really is, politically, out of it. And a lot of the work being produced, at least on some of the evidence here, barely rates a second look.

There are exceptions in the Giardini, the park that hosts some 30 national pavilions. One, a witty video by the young Russian artist Taus Makhacheva, shows an acrobat transferring a museum's worth of Socialist Realist paintings, by tightrope, from one Caucasus peak to another. Also of interest is a 2009 video, by Agnieszka Polska, documenting the career of the underknown Polish Conceptualist Włodzimierz Borowski (1930-2008). Two veteran African-American artists look strong: Senga Nengudi, with her stretched-fabric sculptures, and McArthur Binion, with his autobiographical abstraction. (He paints on copies of his 1946 Mississippi birth certificate.) And, in an essential inclusion, there's what amounts to a precious career survey of the Damascus-born painter Marwan, who died last year.

The installation at the Arsenale, a former medieval shipyard, is more persuasive overall, largely thanks to a concentration of fiber-based work by Leonor Antunes (Portugal), Petrit Halilaj (Kosovo), Abdoulaye Konate (Mali), Maria Lai (Sardinia) and Franz Erhard Walther (Germany). Pushing a neo-1960s vibe, Ms. Macel includes the American choreographer Anna Halprin and the Slovenian artist collective OHO.

But she runs into trouble in the Pavilion of Shamans, which has as its centerpiece a large open-weave, tentlike enclosure by the Brazilian artist Ernesto Neto. Viewers are welcome to hang out in the enclosure, though at the Biennale opening, it was occupied mainly by ceremonially dressed Amazonian Indians brought by Mr. Neto to perform religious rituals.

Their presence was disconcerting. It revived the "primitivism" debate of 30 years, its terms unchanged: We in the West continue to import the Other for our pleasure, while remaining complicit in a global economy that is destroying the Other's world. True to this Biennale's frustratingly muted politics, no curatorial statement appears, acknowledging these issues.

Only one major piece makes an effort to bridge the art-life divide through what is now known as "social practice," and that is the traveling project called "Green Light — An Artistic Workshop," under the direction of the artist Olafur Eliasson. Installed at the Giardini, it's in the form of a public atelier staffed by professional craftsmen who are training a group of immigrants and asylum seekers to assemble lamps designed by Mr. Eliasson and sold to sustain the workshop.

Useful as it may be, the project is typical of the mainstream art world's boutique approach to hands-on-politics, one that often ropes its beneficiaries into being art objects themselves, as live performers. A more discreet version of this model is the project called "Process Collettivo," initiated by Mark Bradford, the artist who represents the United States at the Biennale this year.

A year before the show, Mr. Bradford proposed a work program to authorities at two Venetian prisons, through which inmates, male and female, would learn to produce a variety of luxury goods — tote bags, cosmetics — the sale of which would financially ease their transition upon

release. In partnership with a local social work cooperative called Rio Terà dei Pensieri, the program is now fully underway, selling its products out of a small Venice shop, and funded for the next several years by Mr. Bradford, who established a similar project for at-risk youths in his hometown, Los Angeles.

As a biennale artist, he has also taken over the American Pavilion in the Giardini and created a dense environment of abstract molded and painted forms that suggest, among other things, the underworld of European classical myths and the hull of a trans-Atlantic slave ship. His work occupies one of some 50 national pavilions divided between the Giardini and the Arsenale. The few that make a lasting impression this year tend to be devoted to single artists. Tracey Moffatt's solo show at the Australian Pavilion, on the tragedy of mass social displacement, present and past, is one. The career survey of the wonderful Romanian artist Geta Bratescu, now 91, is another.

Anne Imhof's performance piece at the German Pavilion won the Golden Lion award. Its two-level set, with a see-through floor, was intriguing, though the performance itself relied too much on a chic menace reminiscent of fashion ads in *Artforum*.

At the Arsenale, Zad Moultaka's sound-and-light apocalypse in the Lebanon Pavilion, with a bomber fuselage at its center, is something to see, as is Roberto Cuoghi's sexy sculptural mortuary at the Italian Pavilion, organized by Cecilia Alemani. Otherwise, some of the better national presentations are tucked away in palazzos, churches, apartments and gardens across town. They can be hard to find — I've spent half a day looking for a single pavilion — but some are worth the hunt.

That's true of a selection of paintings, by the Caribbean artist Frank Walter, at the Antigua and Barbuda Pavilion, and of excellent group shows at the pavilions sponsored by Iraq and Nigeria. My favorite find was the NSK State Pavilion, dedicated to a country that is basically an art project: NSK stands for Neue Slowenische Kunst and exists only in the minds of its passport-bearing citizens, of which, after filing a form and paying a modest fee, I am now one. (Nearest vaporetto: San Stae.) The Tunisian Pavilion is issuing papers this year, too: a Universal Travel Document, stamped with a seal that says "Only Human" and valid anywhere, everywhere.

The Biennale also has what it calls "collateral events," often organized by private foundations or commercial galleries. This year's include a beauty and a beast. The Swiss-based Hauser & Wirth Gallery has delivered a coup — the thematic survey loan show "Philip Guston and the Poets," which not only presents that American artist in sovereign form, but also enshrines him in the Vatican of Venetian painting, the Gallerie dell'Accademia (through Sept. 3).

Would it be worth going all the way to Venice to see Guston? In this case, probably yes. The show won't travel. While there, you'll want to drop by the Fondazione Prada, which does the kind of offbeat exhibitions no one else ever thinks of or dares. The current one, called "The Boat is Leaking. The Captain Lied," ingeniously assembled from discarded stage sets, gives a sense of how Franz Kafka might have experienced the world.

The other must-see, only because a lot of people seem to be seeing it, is the double-barreled rollout of new sculpture by Damien Hirst, presented by the François Pinault Foundation at the Palazzo Grassi and Punta della Dogana.

Titled "Treasures From the Wreck of the Unbelievable," this show of mostly bronze sculpture is billed as a cache of ancient objects that sank in the Indian Ocean 2,000 years ago and was finally hauled up in 2008. Mostly figurative, the work ranges from teensy to supersize (one piece is

three stories tall), and reveals an unexpected degree of multiculturalism in images that go beyond standard Greek nudes to include Hathor, Kali, Quetzalcoatl, the Buddha, and Mickey Mouse. Isn't that Bernini? And aren't those Dürer's "Praying Hands"?

I guess it's meant to be fun, though it's a pretty expensive joke. (How many "Process Collettivos," do you think, could be paid for with \$60 million?) Maybe because I was coming to Venice this time from a stay in Rome, I'd already had my fill, in art, of antique bloviation and bad Baroque, and here it was again on the Grand Canal.

I'm instinctively sympathetic to career-salvaging efforts on an artist's part, which this work is rumored to be. And experience has taught me that damning criticism can be as useful, promotion-wise, as praise. So I don't have much to say about "Treasures of the Wreck" except that it's there; that some people care; and that it's irrelevant to anything I know about that matters.