

# frieze

## GIARDINI PAVILIONS

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## GIARDINI PAVILIONS

I must start with an apology. After committing to write a review of the 29 exhibitions held in the 29 permanent national pavilions in the main gardens (the Giardini) of the 56th Venice Biennale, I have failed. Any attempt to properly respond to so many individual viewpoints, historical, social and geographical contexts and frequently oblique back stories is doomed from the start. Not only is the research daunting, but the physical limitations of visiting the Venice Biennale during opening week also make things tricky for the art critic: the queues are endless and the hot galleries packed like a pub on a Friday night, none of which is conducive to the levels of serious analysis that such an endeavour requires. The truth about the Venice Biennale is that, however much you attempt to see, it will never be enough. It does, however, make one thing very clear: the world is a complicated place. So, what follows is subjective and fragmented – which is, I suspect, how most people experience art. It's also, let's not forget, how most people make art.

On a positive note: for once, male artists do not dominate the national pavilions. Australia, Great Britain, Greece, Japan, Norway, Russia, Switzerland and the United States are all represented by women, while Belgium, Brazil, Canada, Germany, Korea, Poland, Spain and Venezuela are showing the work of collectives or groups, all of which include women. Subsequently, over half the exhibitors are female: is this a first? That said, apart from biology, very little unites these artists: the nonsensical phrase 'a feminine sensibility' should be forever banished, because there is no such thing. Sarah Lucas's British pavilion, its walls painted egg-yolk yellow, is at once an homage to a dessert (a 'floating island': a meringue in vanilla custard) and a riotous ode to the folly, beauty and inevitable

obsolescence of the human body and the various sculptural forms it can inspire. Joan Jonas, whose US pavilion received a Special Mention from the biennale jury, has created a hallucinatory, often beautiful, environment from film, drawings and brightly coloured hand-made kites that was inspired by the nature writings of the late Icelandic Nobel Prize winner, Halldór Laxness. That Jonas finds solace in nature and comradeship with animals is clear, even if her precise meaning is elusive, but then why should art explain anything in the same way that words can? Each of the five rooms is linked by screens onto which are projected translucent layers of video footage: children in paper masks, bees, honeycomb, dogs, horses, fish and forests drift in and out of focus. Snatches of songs, ghost stories, quotes and poems, many murmured in Jonas's melifluous tones, conjure the way memories are created: a series of seemingly inconsequential moments that, in the end, make up a life. In one online interview, Jonas gently advises: 'Please don't try to understand it, just experience it.' I took her at her word.

Fiona Hall, Australia's representative, also created an immersive installation influenced by the natural world, but her intentions are more overtly political. Her theatrically lit show – held in Australia's minimal new pavilion, the first to be built in the Giardini this century, and inspired by Richard Serra's sculptures – is full to the brim with cabinets of curiosities and small sculptures created from materials as disparate as sardines tins, bank-notes, driftwood and military fatigues. It's an art that looks old, was made in the present and yet is filled with a sense of premonition; in this, Hall's preoccupation with environmental disaster and human rights abuses, especially in regard to the death of asylum seekers at sea, echo many of the concerns of artistic director Okwui Enwezor's main exhibition, 'All the World's Futures'.

Indeed, the topics of Enwezor's show – cultural change, historical rupture, political turmoil, the failures of capitalism – resonate

in many of the national pavilions. In the first room of Irina Nakhova's Russian pavilion, the artist's blinking eyes peer out nervously from an enormous sculpture of a quasi-military style helmet connected to a breathing apparatus. It is both sinister and ludicrous: an apt representation of contemporary Russia. Meanwhile, the German pavilion has been transformed into a factory of sorts, although not the kind where anything apart from meaning is made. According to the press release, it's a 'resonant space in which the productive sound of the globalized world can be heard', which sounds like any busy road in a big city. Jasmina Metwaly / Philip Rizk, Olaf Nicolai, Hito Steyerl and Tobias Zielony spin, in various ways, around ideas generated by 'work', 'migration' and 'revolt'. The roof was transformed into a viewing space; Nicolai has engaged various actors to perform unspecified 'mysterious activities' up there but I didn't see any. (Rumours of boomerang throwing abounded.) Zielony presented photographs of refugees in Germany; for their documentary 'Out on the Street', the filmmakers Metwaly / Rizk asked Cairo citizens to tell stories about power; and Steyerl filled the large basement with deckchairs and a screening of her hip, hypnotic film *Factory of the Sun* (2015) (one of the most talked-about works in the biennale), which somehow wove together stories about drones, Deutsche Bank, a YouTube dance star, a spoof video game and a young woman's Soviet grandparents. This intermingling of perspectives is also present in the Belgian pavilion: when the artist Vincent Messen was chosen to represent his country he, in turn, invited 12 more artists to contribute to an exhibition that aims to 'challenge a Eurocentric idea of modernity' and look into 'hybrid encounters' that were 'produced as a result of colonial encounters'. The result is compelling.

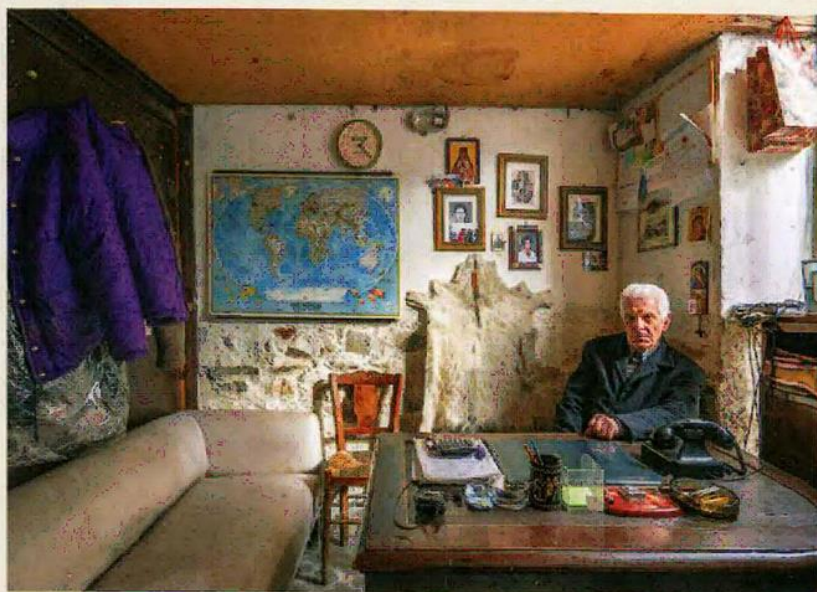




— cram-filled with images and ideas — and occasionally heavy-handed. I wonder what Mark Twain would have made of Elisabetta Benassi's *M'Fumu* (2015), which comprises an actor sitting in front of a wall of bones reading aloud from Twain's satirical essay 'King Leopold's Soliloquy' (1905), which imagines the Belgian King attempting to justify his brutal rule over the Congolese. Most visitors listened for a moment before moving on: is this really the best way to communicate the full power of the writer's dazzling fury?

If politics is everywhere in this biennale, nature is too, as is the ghost of Charles Darwin, whose name kept popping up. Maria Papadimitriou's Greek pavilion, 'Why Look at Animals? AGRIMIKÁ', a re-creation of a shop in Velos that sells animal hides, was titled after a John Berger essay, but name-checks Darwin in its questioning of the relationship between humans and other species. Adrian Ghenie represents Romania with 'Darwin's Room', a series of anxious, brilliant paintings, including high-keyed portraits — Darwin, Adolf Hitler, a young girl — and one enormous study of birch trees and a figure half-hidden in snow. Representing France, Céleste Boursier-Mougenot's 'Revolutions' — a reference to both *rêve* (dream), 'cosmic revolutions' and the French Revolution — features an enormous uprooted tree that slowly rotates to a soundtrack of the sap moving through it; it's intended to be an 'island of refuge' where visitors can 'seek some rest'. In this, the artist is successful. Visitors glance at the tree, collapse onto the welcome circle of foam seats and then check their phones. Outside the pavilion, like the earth on its axis, two more trees spin so slowly that pedestrians stop in their tracks, as if unsure whether what they are seeing is a result of their prosecco-foggy heads.

Some artists, however, believe that less is definitely more, although often what looks like 'less' is often anything but. Take Pamela Rosenkranz's Swiss pavilion, for example: according to the press release, her installation — a pink, skin-like sea that fills the pavilion, created from chemicals including Neotene, Silicone, Viagra, Bionin and Necrion — 'activates the knowledge mobilized in the technological, scientific and conceptual development of products, subverting the culturally consolidated meanings of art'. I've re-read this countless times and I still don't know what it means. The work itself is eerie: it smells like a chemistry lab, evokes the deathliness of a stagnant pond and yet was surprisingly popular. One friend observed that, amidst the cacophony of the biennale, the more restrained pavilions had a certain calming appeal. Perhaps he has a point, but Rosenkranz's installation is oddly blank, and its claims to meaning over-inflated. Heimo Zobernig's Austrian pavilion also looks empty but, again, it's a complicated kind of emptiness. Zobernig attempted to respond directly to the existing exhibition situation in the Austrian pavilion designed by Josef Hoffmann and Robert Kramreiter and built in 1934 and answer the question: 'How can a meaningful contribution be made in an environment based on nation-state representations and in which each voice competes for the most attention?' He removed elements of the architecture and added others, lowering the ceiling



1  
Joan Jonas  
*They Come to Us without a Word*,  
2015, production still,  
installed in the US pavilion

2  
Fiona Hall, *Holdfast (Macrocystis  
angustifolia; giant kelp)*, 2007,  
included in, 'Wrong Way Time',  
Australian pavilion, 2015

3  
Maria Papadimitriou  
*'Why Look at Animals? AGRIMIKÁ'*, Greek pavilion,  
2015, installation view

4  
Hito Steyerl  
*Factory of the Sun*, 2015,  
HD video still, installed in the  
German pavilion

and raising the floor to a uniform level, and opened up the building to the garden creating a quiet, contemplative space. This made one thing very clear: taking things away in order to draw attention to the complicated history of the pavilion is no less demanding on the visitor than, say, cramming it full of paintings.

Some people feel that the idea of showing art in national pavilions is an anachronistic one: wandering around this year's biennale, I realized how much I disagree. In these days of tub-thumping nationalism, how often are countries represented not by kitsch, bombast and cliché but by the infinite possibilities of the imagination, by nuance, complexity, empathy and confusion? The biennale is one of the few places that encourages such an approach to thinking about our place in the world. I'm all for it. I just wish I could do it justice.

JENNIFER HIGGIE

