

Stepping off the Vaporetto: Venice Biennale 2017

By [Francesca Gavin](#)

Francesca Gavin takes a trip to Venice and discovers a subtle and poetic approach to navigating the tumultuous discontent of today.

Swaying off the floating city of Venice, you realise you should never take art for granted. Even the burnt out and blasé cannot visit something as large, as international and as ambitious as a Venice and not find at least one surprise. In the socio-political tsunami of today, there were rumbles of discontent that the presentation by Christine Macel was not about direct action. Yet her curation felt intimate and poetic. She brought together works about reading, our relationship to nature, the handmade and the spiritual. Not all of them were successful but the intention felt authentic. There was almost something countercultural going on. It felt like a statement on how making art could change energy and contribute to a new world.



James Richards and Steve Reinke, *What weakens the flesh is the flesh itself*, digital video with sound (still) (2017). © James Richards and Steve Reinke. Courtesy Wales in Venice.

Across Venice it was video works that stood out. James Richards' presentation for Wales in Venice was the perfect example. Alongside a site-specific sound installation in a chapel, his incredible film *What weakens the flesh is the flesh itself* (2017) pieced together representations of masculinity from naked men posing with fruit, to old photos of the artist as a youth, to pixelated footage of soldiers. The work was weird and loose (footage of ants squirming in orgasmic abandon for example), leaving the viewer firmly in Richards' inventive hands.



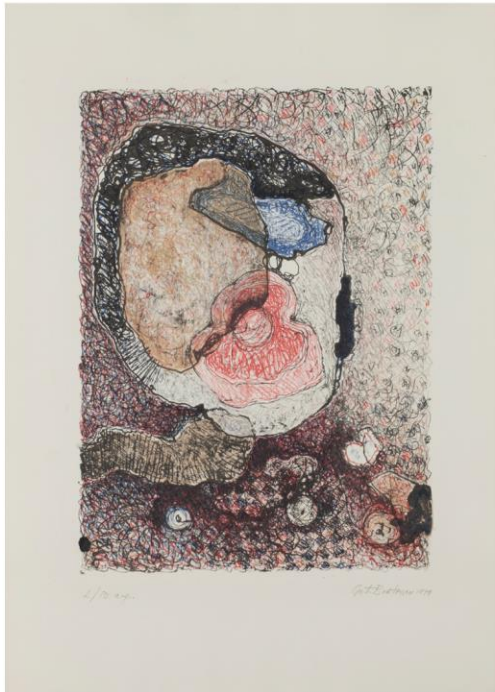
Still from Jeremy Shaw's *Liminals* (2017). HD video installation. Courtesy König Galerie, Berlin.

Jeremy Shaw's video *Liminals* (2017) was another exceptional work shown in the main presentation at the Arsénale. The sci-fi narrative documented a group of individuals trying to hurry evolution and inhabit the space between humanity and technology through physical practises that echoed 1970s spiritual sects. Filmed in black and white, at one point the heavy bass and flashing imagery hypnotically draws you in before the image shatters into a disintegrating techno-colour space which is endlessly shocking.

There were films that made you cry (Candice Breitz's reworking of interviews with refugees starring Julianne Moore and Alec Baldwin), or laugh (the four John Smith films on show at Venice gallery Alma Zevi), or learn (the off-site Angola pavilion devoted to documentarian António Ole). There were video installations about the environment (Charles Atlas' giant projection wall of sunsets at Robert Rauschenberg's home in Captiva, Florida) or nauseous films about a fictional hyper-world (Scotland's Rachel Maclean's cyclical vile-pop post-truth reworking of Pinocchio). All of these were films you wanted to watch, rather than race past in a predictable, speedy haze.



Candice Breitz, *Love Story* (2016), Featuring Alec Baldwin and Julianne Moore, 7-Channel Installation.



Geta Bratescu at The Central Pavilion.

VR pieces popped out across the city (including Paul McCarthy for the Farschou Foundation at Fondazione Cini which was violent and limited, and Ryder Ripps for Zuecca Project Space which was a brilliant interactive dissection of factory production). Sound was also another sensory presence. Kader Attia created an entire installation dedicated to the human voice - using couscous on speakers to show how vocals resonated and transformed space. Hassan Khan's *Composition for a Public Park* (2013/17) got a deserved Silver Lion. He created a circular path of black speakers on poles in the Arsenale garden resulting in a surround sound experience of Egyptian rhythms, violins tuning up and whispers.

There was something wonderful about looking back at the older inspirations across Venice too - a city that always exudes historical beauty. This was the year to honour the broadly talented 91 year old Geta Bratescu who represented Romania; the durational performances in 1980 by Sam Hsieh; a taster of the breadth of Carol Rama's practise at Ca'Nova; VAC foundation's fascinating exploration into the heritage of Russian 20th century art and most of all the Philip Guston show at the Galleria dell'Accademia, which paired him with poets from DH Lawrence to Clark Coolidge. History felt fresh and innovative and directional.



Anne Imhof, *Faust*, 2017 at German Pavilion, Venice Biennale, 2017. Photo: Nadine Fraczkowski. Courtesy: the artist and German Pavilion 2017.

There was one artist showing in Venice it was impossible not to discuss - the winner of the Golden Lion, Anne Imhof and her work, *Faust* (2017). Following recent shows at the Kunsthalle Basel and Hamburger Bahnhof in Berlin, Imhof created a brutal installation space, erecting a giant fence around the pavilion with four Doberman dogs prowling (or playing) within. Inside, the space was dissected by Perspex walls - a glass floor, chambers that cut sections of the room off but that could be seen within. Performers dressed in monochrome sportswear inserted themselves around the space, moving slowly, twisting bodies, lip-syncing, posing for an ever-seeing camera. The performers were densely surrounded by greedy viewers capturing them on camera phones - a statement that in itself felt exceptional of the now. There was something uncomfortable about the work too - it was hard not to think of references to fascism or how contemporary art was exploiting the language of dance without reflecting its changing history and language. Yet it was impossible to forget the ever-changing work, and for those who did not know her work it was a revelation on the brutality and surface of contemporary image-heavy life.