

frieze

57th Venice Biennale: Off-Site Pavilions and Collateral Shows

The best of the National Pavilions across the city
and the Fondazione Prada's intricate, collaborative
exhibition

BY PABLO LARIOS



James Richards, *Music for the gift*, 2017, production still of archive image. Courtesy: The Schwules Museum*, Berlin

'I want to build death but I don't know what materials to use.' James Richards's masterful 'Music for the gift' - in which these words appear - is easily one of the most disturbing, moving and intense presentations at this year's Venice Biennale. On view at the Welsh Pavilion is a new video work *What weakens the flesh is the flesh itself* (2017) made by Richards in collaboration with Canadian artist Steve Reinke, whom he has worked with on some of his early films. The video takes a point of departure from the private archive of Albrecht Becker (held at the Schwules Museum* in Berlin): a homosexual stage designer and photographer who was persecuted by the Nazis.



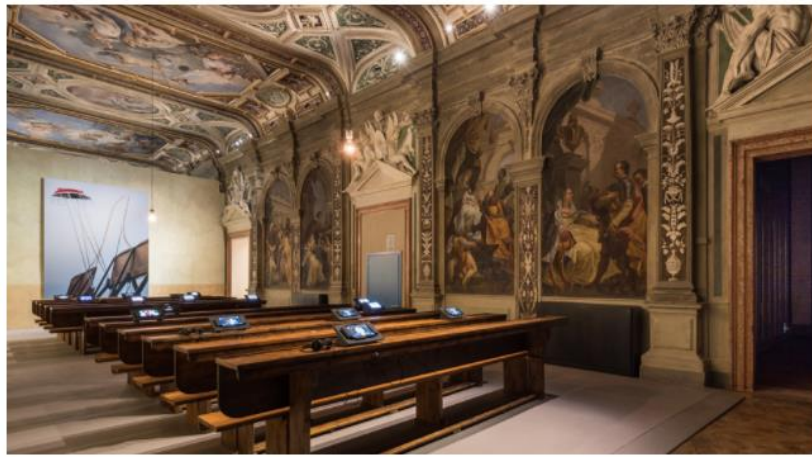
James Richards, *Migratory Motor Complex*, 2017, six-channel audio installation. Commissioned by Wales in Venice for the 57th Venice Biennale □ James Richards. Courtesy: Wales in Venice; photograph: Jamie Woodley

Beginning with photographic imagery, which Becker delicately manipulated so that he appears to be viewing himself, the video soon reveals his naked body which he subjected to extreme modifications: tattoos, ritualistic pain, and genital modification. Over footage, alternately mesmerizing and painful to watch, in which images are overlain in such a way as to echo the scarring of the body, the video reflects on the connections between desire and technology, employing digital effects and video clips, and an expert and precise use of sound, to steep itself in the themes that Becker lived out and experienced: human brutality, sex and machinic pleasure, the body and its appendages, and the capacity for humans to subjugate one another. The video contains an autobiographical note, too, as it cycles through photographs of Richards, with friends, perhaps at a festival. In another room is an exquisite sound installation placed amid a gridded seating structure, *Migratory Motor Complex* (2017), in which the possibilities of sonic immersion are virtuosic, abstract and moody. At a moment when notions of privacy are upheld abstractly yet feel fraught and fragile, Richards examines the construction of the 'private' and the jarring proximity with which intimacy and self-expression are allied to estrangement and pain. Still, there is an element of humour to this: in one sequence of the film, we hear Dinah Washington's 'This Bitter Earth' (1964): 'This bitter earth might not be so bitter after all.'



Tehching Hsieh, *One Year Performance 1980-1981*, New York. Courtesy: © the artist and Sean Kelly Gallery, New York; photograph: Micheal Shen

Selfhood, exile, performance, shelter – these are subjects invoked within Tehching Hsieh's works on view in 'Doing Time', an exhibition at the collateral pavilion of Taiwan, documenting two of Hsieh's iconic and powerful one-year performances from the 1980s (he made five of these in total). A letter, dated 26 September 1981, contains a statement in which Hsieh writes: 'I shall stay OUTDOORS for one year, and never go inside. I shall not go in to a building, subway, train, car, airplane, ship, cave, tent.' In one room, we see a slide presentation of his performance in which he clocked in on the hour, every hour, and photographed himself doing so; and numerous vertical strips of photographic prints of this performance cover the walls like so many prison bars. These works – including the clothing Hsieh wore, and some new works in which he reflects on his past performances – are extremely acute, as they prefigured a 24-hour working economy and our contemporary entrapment with 'clocking in' and availability, as well as a gradual effacement of nearly any private sphere, as lives, images, and experiences are externalized in real time. Documentation from Hsieh's *Outdoor Piece* (1981-82), in which he existed outdoors in New York's TriBeCa for an entire year, are genuinely moving: we see maps of Manhattan describing where he went, when and how he spent his time. In the video documentation of this action presented on a monitor, we see Hsieh accosted by police and struggling to resist them taking him inside the police station. The ability of the works to speak to themes as broad and prescient as shelter, the culture of working and externalization, and the effacement of any public space is, for me, evidence of art's versatility and contextual agility.



'The Boat is Leaking. The Captain Lied.', installation view, Fondazione Prada, Venice. Courtesy Fondazione Prada; photograph: Delfino Sisto Legnani and Marco Cappelletti

What, today, doesn't have any relationship to work? Rainer Werner Fassbinder once asked a factory worker in Germany's industrial Rhine valley to think of words that do not relate to notions of work: the man answered 'play', 'yawn', 'pray', 'sleep', 'ruminate', 'hate', 'choke', 'rib', 'wake up', 'smoke', 'undress someone'. The story appears in Alexander Kluge's film *A Message from an Unpublished Scene in a Film by R. W. Fassbinder* (2017) looped within the section 'Work, Anti-Work and Industry 4.0', on view at the Fondazione Prada's 'The Boat is Leaking. The Captain Lied.' The large, intricate, maze-like exhibition brings together the works of three figures: filmmaker Alexander Kluge, artist Thomas Demand, and stage designer Anna Viebrock in order to examine notions of illusion, staging, secrecy and private space, 20th century history, human labour and automation, financialization and terrorism. The exhibition – which purportedly takes a point of departure from a sequence of paintings by Angelo Morbelli – examines politics in an era where statecraft resembles stagecraft, and where the proverbial captain has fallen asleep at the helm. Highlights of the exhibition include the stage design presentations of Viebrock and the numerous films and interviews Kluge has done with other artists (including Ben Lerner, Svetlana Alexievich and Thomas Demand), working with his film company DCTP (Development Company for Television Program). In one, Kluge and Austrian director Michael Haneke interpret Jacob and Wilhelm Grimm's shortest fairy tale, 'The Wilful Child', in which a disobedient child is cursed by God, dies, and is so wilful it resists death itself.



'The Boat is Leaking. The Captain Lied.', installation view, Fondazione Prada, Venice. Courtesy: Fondazione Prada; photograph: Delfino Sisto Legnani and Marco Cappelletti

A 'dark Venetian fairy tale' is how Rachel Maclean describes her new video *Spite Your Face* (2017), a raunchy, hilarious allegory at the Scottish Pavilion. The work – filled with hook-beaked Venetian masks, wilful children and a gold-plated everything – is a 37-minute-long looping video in which a Pinocchio-like character, named Pic, tells lies, grows a nose, becomes a demagogue ('truth is smelly!' he shouts). Pic's nose is fellated by Saint Catherine and the figure is eventually forced to eat his own removed, hyper-extended organ. After ripping his nose off, Pic shouts: 'all that glitters is not gold'. Maclean, who acted every role in the film, is plated in gold. The works sound heavy-handed but their slapstick is hilarious, and examines the possibilities of digital video to comment on authenticity, truth, falsehood and 'post-truth' politics in a manner that feels fresh and comical.



Rachel Maclean, *Spite Your Face*, 2017, installation view, Scotland + Venice. Commissioned by Alchemy Film & Arts in partnership with Talbot Rice Gallery and the University of Edinburgh. Courtesy: Scotland + Venice; photograph: Patrick Rafferty

Video is alive and well these days, and consistently the works on view in this year's biennale showcase the high quality and energy with which artists are working with the medium. Notable examples are Wendelien van Oldenborgh at the Dutch Pavilion and Sharon Lockhart at the Polish Pavilion; while, in the curated section of the Giardini, Rachel Rose and Sung Hwan Kim showed films and installations that constitute some of the best new works on view this year. Such pieces manage to break free from rigid curatorial framing and exemplify how art can capture and document the segmentation, sectarianism, violence and deterioration of the world around us. Art's ability to speak for itself is an idea we all seem to agree upon – what that means in practice is another question altogether.

Main image: 'The Boat is Leaking. The Captain Lied.', installation view, Fondazione Prada, Venice. Courtesy: Fondazione Prada; photograph: Delfino Sisto Legnani and Marco Cappelletti