

# sculpture

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## ST. LOUIS

### Medardo Rosso

#### Pulitzer Arts Foundation

Though Medardo Rosso (1858–1928) is not as widely known today as he should be, a number of his contemporaries (including the influential French poet Guillaume Apollinaire) considered him to be as great a sculptor as Rodin. “Medardo Rosso: Experiments in Light and Form” addressed this omission with a visually arresting and extremely informative presentation of his works from 1882 to 1906, curated by Sharon Hecker, a leading Rosso scholar, and Tamara H. Schenkenberg, an associate curator at the Pulitzer Arts Foundation.

The exhibition, the most comprehensive museum survey of Rosso’s work in the U.S. to date, featured approximately 100 sculptures, drawings, and photographs, many on view for the first time. The small, mostly undated drawings are believed to be independent works, not studies, and the intriguing, innovative photographs—with alterations and additions—demonstrate his keen interest in light phenomena, new mediums, and new technical resolutions. The pairing of art and architecture here was unusually felicitous, with the works meticulously installed in collaboration with the natural light that plays throughout the Tadao Ando-designed museum.

Rosso’s sculptures are primarily executed in wax and plaster, their surfaces and forms expressionistic and startlingly responsive to light. While his preference for these materials might have begun as a neces-

sity, they soon became integrated into his aesthetic, as he sought to redefine the language of sculpture. Even his bronzes are animated, the light playing restlessly across their agitated surfaces.

He was deeply preoccupied with the dematerialization of form as an extension of the fleeting effects of light and shadow, spurred by the optical experiments of the Impressionists and Post-Impressionists and by the

avant-garde discourse of his time. Rosso’s vision is less sweeping, less inclined toward grandeur than Rodin’s, his works seldom higher than two feet; one exception, at three feet, is his sensitive bronze portrait of Henri Rouart (late 1889–90), a patron of the arts. The two artists were friends and had exchanged works, but there was a falling out because Rosso felt that Rodin had appropriated a number of his ideas

without acknowledgment. The stance of Rosso’s *The Bookmaker* (1893–95), for instance, with the figure tilted to the side and drawn up and back, strongly resembles the final pose adopted by Rodin for his celebrated *Monument to Balzac*, completed in 1897 and often acclaimed as the first modern sculpture.

Rosso’s production was not prodigious, encompassing only about 40 distinct subjects over the course of



Medardo Rosso, *Ecce puer (Behold the Child)*, 1906. Bronze with plaster investment, 43.8 x 36 x 33 cm.





**Left:** Medardo Rosso, *Carne altrui* (*Flesh of Others*), 1883–84. Wax with plaster interior, 33 x 37 x 30 cm. **Below left:** Medardo Rosso, *Madame Noblet*, c.1897–98. Plaster, 64.5 x 52.5 x 45.5 cm. **Below right:** Medardo Rosso, *Enfant au sein* (*Child at the Breast*), 1889–90. Bronze, 50 x 45 x 20 cm.

(a concierge, a prostitute, a street urchin), progressing from the realistic to the almost purely abstract (such works almost seem like precursors to Brancusi). For these reasons and more, Rosso was attuned to the future as he presciently, intuitively, and rebelliously embraced subjectivity, interiority, and the emotional and psychological — points of view compatible with our own.

*Ecce puer*, Rosso recast work from his repertoire for the next two decades until his death in Milan at the age of 70 (he had returned to Italy, following the end of World War I, after 30 years in Paris).

Rosso's sensibility is poetic and pensive; his version of Baudelaire's heroism of modern life is rooted in ordinary people and the ordinary circumstances of their lives. The sense of vulnerability that he conveys in his work suits his personae, most often women, children, the elderly, and the socially marginalized

Some of the works are beauties. Among the loveliest is *Madame X* (1896), a head in glowing honey-colored wax, the features barely discernible, as if veiled in light. Another standout is *Aetas aurea* (*Golden Age*) from late 1885–86, a mother-and-child motif that Rosso had depicted in several versions; the one in yellow wax is particularly captivating, the mother caressing the child's chubby cheek with one extended finger as if to soothe it

his creative life, replicated in a range of materials. His last original work, *Ecce puer* (*Behold the Child*) (1906), is a haunting portrayal; the softly blurred visage pictures a state of potential, a coming into being that typifies most of his works. He often

leaves traces of the process visible — and did so early on. These traces include the investment left over from castings and mistakes made in production, elements that valorize both process and the irregularities that other artists smoothed away. After



TOP: JIM CORBETT © 2016 ALISE O'BRIEN PHOTOGRAPHY, COURTESY AMEDEO PORRO FINE ARTS, LUGANO/LONDON / BOTTOM: COURTESY MUSEO MEDARDO ROSO

or simply to touch its silken skin. Other works may be harder to admire at first glance, including the bronze edition of *Enfant au sein* (*Child at the breast*) from late 1889–90 or the ungainly countenances of *Madame Noblet* (c.1897–98) and *Yvette Guilbert* (1895). Such sculptural suggestions at times resemble misshapen lumps of matter, but they have their own slow-simmering potency, as does Rosso's entire, astonishing oeuvre.

—Lilly Wei

## ATLANTA

### Elizabeth Lide

#### The Museum of Contemporary Art of Georgia

With a focus on organizing space, Atlanta-based Elizabeth Lide explores how we shape—and are shaped by—our personal past. Her recent, multi-part installation of sculpture, drawing, and stitchery, *Putting the House in Order*, which marked the culmination of a 2015/16 Working Artist Project Fellowship awarded by the museum, investigated the literal and metaphorical influence of memory, family history, and accumulated domestic objects, all of which Lide believes can be both burden and assurance.

How much space does the past assume in our present lives? If memory were tangible, how would its connections manifest? A framed poem by the Chinese writer Ha Jin was integral to Lide's installation. Placed just beyond the airy, white curtains that established an entry

into the gallery, it hung on a wall that Lide designed to reflect the principles of dynamic symmetry. In the text, the poet asserts that his past is as much a part of himself as the shadow that appears whenever he is in the sun. The past, he writes, "cannot be thrown off and its weight / must be borne, or I will become another man."

Lide's attachment to the past is strong. She engages its artifacts deliberately, with an eye to structure as a means of investigating their influence, but always with a light, meditative touch. Here, she transformed the cavernous white museum into a quiet, contemplative, and

intimate space, an effect achieved, in part, through a centrally located, specially designed room-within-a-room, where these objects—and the order imposed on them—could be considered by viewers with a focus equal to her own. Elegant white-on-white vitrines became reliquaries, directing attention to delicate handkerchiefs, tiny leather baby shoes, sewing scissors, and Lide's father's stethoscope.

Subdued color was another unifying, calming factor—baby dresses and christening gowns in hushed ivory cotton batiste, generations old and all but transparent with time, or whispery silk slips and gowns in the

palest pastels. Lide introduced more color into her drawings—grid-like, reticulate, or shard-like shapes, like memory—which she calls in her statement "architectural, but unrealistic; shapes without function." Though welcome pops of bright red completed collected paper, and an occasional tangerine, ultramarine, or geranium pink made its way into the stitchery on pieces of tattered quilting displayed in embroidery hoops, Lide's overall palette reinforced the abiding effects of time and memory.

Lide revisits the past and brings it forward into the present in a meditation that, though it could have easily been otherwise, never dipped



Above and detail: Elizabeth Lide, *Putting the House in Order*, 2016–17. Built room inside gallery, paper and paper pulp, paint, stitchery, Ha Jin poem, drawings, clothes, family objects, plaster, aluminum vases poured from family objects, record player, 8-mm film, and plaster and paper-pulp vases with human hair and pigment molded from family objects, installation view.



**Left:** Daniel Boccato, *laxface*, 2016. Epoxy, fiberglass, and polyurethane, 55.5 x 31 x 12 in. **Above:** Daniel Boccato, installation view of “creepers,” 2016.

into the maudlin or nostalgic. Partly owing to the skill and respect with which she reinvents inherited or accumulated objects—acting on them, in turn, as they have acted on her—Lide steps into the same shoes as the poet Ha Jin. Wall-high columns of overlapping, tobacco-brown sheets of paper inherited from a friend formed an anchoring installation along the museum’s back wall. (Lide was born and raised in Winston-Salem, North Carolina, tobacco country.) Lide claimed the pages for herself, inscribing centering circles of gray on each sheet, suggesting wholeness, repetition, and timelessness.

Lide molded some of what she calls the “finer” inherited objects—crystal vases and pitchers, southern crockery, jugs, and ice buckets—in aluminum, pastel paper pulp, or plaster—then reinforced them with strips of fabric and her daughter’s hair. She arranged two dozen or so of these sculptures on a single shelf, above which 8mm home movies from the 1940s and ’50s flickered in a silent, bright loop of smiles, Easter dresses, and summer days—lives,

fleeting and ephemeral, like time itself, anchored by artifacts imbued with a personal sense of their enduring impact.

—Donna Mintz

#### BROOKLYN

##### Daniel Boccato

##### The Journal Gallery

Brazilian-born Daniel Boccato’s first solo exhibition in New York presented a fascinating demonstration of pluralities in terms of the linear logistics of fate. The exhibition consisted of half-a-dozen brightly colored, monochrome bas-reliefs in resin-soaked, cast fiberglass. The quirky silhouetted forms belie the sophistry of their facture—faux naïf that is neither faux nor naïve. Boccato builds poorly constructed molds in order to create intentionally “bad sculpture,” in the vein of so-called “Bad Painting.” Conceptually, this essentially disingenuous inherent contradiction is like staring into a funhouse mirror in which one’s image is repeated ad infinitum. Intentionally stupid equals intelligent equals stupid equals clever. So, is Boccato clever or a jerk? Or are they the same

thing? It is a duplicitous conundrum. He is attempting to capture an intuitive or naturalistic gesture by contravening craft while expertly employing current materials in a sloppy fashion. Maybe it is irritatingly smart; it is certainly not ignorant.

Many 20th-century Western Modernists looked to indigenous tribal cultures in their desire to countermand European conventions of style and materialistic elitism, which they declaimed as didactic and academic, a position that had already become academic by the time of its utterance. In fact, you could argue that Modernism was becoming tribal in and of itself as it hastily descended to the status of the mundane. How was that for a mouthful of artspeak? This is exactly what recent New York art school graduate Boccato is handing us. So, let’s get real. Does the stuff look good or not?

The colors are acidic and nifty, the titles obtusely cute, the subjects ambiguously referential or perhaps wholly abstract within their legions of referents to their own art historical lineage. I actually liked them quite a lot until I started thinking about all the layers of intention, and then I just got a headache.

Millennials, raised on television shows like *The Ren & Stimpy Show*—an amalgam of digital effects and

self-indulgently lousy draftsmanship—make sincerity a tough call. Jeff Elrod’s geeky paintings, for example, are based on the mishandling of a computer mouse. A couple of generations ago, Basquiat told me, “I let my dick do the thinking.” That got him famous and dead in a hurry. Duchamp drew a mustache on a photo of the Mona Lisa 100 years ago. Apparently contrivance will get you somewhere in the art industry. Where it will lead a talented and intriguing artist like Boccato is something I will follow with honestly enthusiastic interest and curiosity. An urbane, ironic, albeit good-natured, masquerading smirk is not a smile. Radical chic is old news. My quaint personal ideal is so old-fashioned, it may be revolutionary—make a masterpiece instead of mocking it.

—Christopher Hart Chambers

#### NEW YORK

##### Kevin Francis Gray

##### Pace Gallery

Kevin Francis Gray’s recent solo exhibition found the neoclassically inspired bronze and marble sculptor making his boldest moves yet in testing the representational ideal of the human figure against a contemporary perspective. More than ever, the exploration of tensions inherent in the dichotomy between figuration





Left: Kevin Francis Gray, *Salamander*, 2017. Carrara marble, 95 x 82 x 50 cm.  
Below: Kevin Francis Gray, *Seated Nude*, 2017. Carrara marble, 110 x 122 x 151 cm.

attentively and with deep consideration—openly render the figure as form.

Considering the sculptures together, it becomes difficult to tell at what degree of completion—or incompletion—each was meant to be presented. Either individual heads or full bodies splayed out in dramatic postures, these works, to varying degrees, feature distortions—interventions that reveal the flesh, or matter, as amorphous. The visual and tactile effect is to render the very substance of the figure vulnerable as it seems to diffuse and decompose.

*Salamander* (2017), a larger-than-life bust, apparently male, introduced the exhibition while telling something of Gray's process. The viewer recognizes the hair above the forehead, the creased eyebrows, the amusing, slightly undulating long nose, and mustache, but the mass is soluble, as if the marble

were clay. Though most of Gray's distortions resemble melting matter, others reveal the work of tools.

*Reclining Nudes I* boasts an arm like an arch, untamed in form, a head whose shape is barely recognizable as such, and an amusingly accentuated bellybutton orienting everything else around it. In *Reclining Nudes II*, forces of abstraction seem to be in the early stages of eating away at, or freeing, the figure. *Seated Nude* (2017), arguably the most exquisite of Gray's nudes, strikes an aesthetically pleasing balance between the competing forces of figuration and abstraction.

A series of busts—*Hades' Head* (2016) and *The Aristocrat* (2017), among them—pick up where *Salamander* left off, adding provocative touches (the raw material of a foundational base left exposed, scratch-marks from tools readily visible) that divulge the process behind the making. In these new works, Gray has not only put his formidable skill as a sculptor of marble on display, he has also contributed to the discourse of the human figure as an ideal, yet ever-changing form and inspiration.

—Arthur Ivan Bravo

and abstraction, which has defined Gray's practice, becomes the central subject of his work. Bolstered not only by his decision to employ marble

alone as his medium, but also by his continuing interest in studying and then departing from the classical figural tradition, his new sculptures—



## NEW YORK

### Marisa Merz

#### The Met Breuer

"The Sky is a Great Space" emphasized the consistency behind Marisa Merz's body of work over chronology, starting with the larger-than-life "Living Sculpture" series (1966) at the exhibition entrance. These giant slinky-toy-like aluminum sheets hung from the ceiling in curls, spirals, and amorphous dangling "bodies"—most (excepting a wrapped armchair and a tent-like shape) without antecedent as "forms." Breath alone could make them sway. Though installed in a spacious setting at the Met Breuer, these same shapes were once jammed together around a television set in the Merz home in Turin (as seen in a photo on the catalogue



Left: Marisa Merz, installation view of “The Sky is a Great Space,” 2017. Below left: Marisa Merz, *Untitled*, no date. Unfired clay, paraffin, copper wire, thumbtack, metallic paint, dried leaf, alabaster, plastic, paper, plaster, paint, graphite, colored pigments, coin, gold leaf, metallic pigment, pastel, colored pencil, and metal table, table: 109 x 67 x 30 cm.



done in a neo-primitive style—for instance, an abstract gold head with one turquoise “eye” area. A 1983 bronze head with only one eyebrow, a nose area, and an indentation instead of an ear is clutched by an uneven number of thin, grasping fingers. Each Merz head resembles a lump with some markings, bumps, and furrows.

“The Sky is a Great Space” demonstrated how Merz’s vision has expanded and evolved over the years while keeping a core expression of the head/figure as endlessly malleable. Almost every work is characterized by unpredictability and a sense of entering and searching beyond the visual. The “feel” shared across her work can be defined as exploratory—original, handmade, and not like anything seen before.

—Jan Garden Castro

cover), where one can imagine them moving and bumping into people.

Merz has had a 50-year career. She has made heads in unfired clay, wax, bronze, and other materials; paintings with copper wire and embedded objects; knitted copper booties and knitted diamonds; and mixed-media works with an ethereal aura that somehow transcends medium and form. All of these various works activate space through their placement, form, or suggested movement.

As the wife of Mario Merz (1925–2003), Marisa participated in Arte Povera, though her work was clearly different. It was considered to evoke

“domestic and bodily forms”—a designation that acknowledged the uniqueness of her mostly untitled work and her ambiguous statements about it. One untitled piece from 1993, for example, features five stave-like rows of copper wire with knitted copper square “notes” and a giant triangular copper addition. This seems to be an abstract work about music, unrelated to the body or domestic issues. Yet *Bea* (1968) delicately, if sloppily, renders her daughter’s name in knitted nylon thread and needles, and *Testa (Head)* (1984–95), an oblong of unfired clay and wax wrapped in a wrinkled lead sheet, is clearly recognizable

as a human head, despite its unusual shape, with oddly expressive eyes and nose but no mouth.

A large untitled painting of a cloaked figure is swathed in silver and gold paint, blue and red streaks, and crossed, in all directions, by strands of copper wire. (The addition of nails, copper wire, and extra pieces makes the paintings three-dimensional.) In other works, a blue blob rests on two long pieces of timber, and a square area of paraffin holds a group of unfired clay pieces that could be heads or phallic or fist-like nobs. Merz’s portraits are hard to “read,” reminding me of Arshile Gorky, Odilon Redon, or Byzantine saints

## PITTSBURGH

### “so it is”

#### Mattress Factory

The group exhibition “so it is,” curated by Belfast native John Carson, presented an impressive collection of installation work by seven artists from Northern Ireland. A practicing artist himself, Carson lived in Northern Ireland in the 1970s and ’80s during the Troubles. He drew on this experience while making his selections, choosing Ursula Burke, Willie Doherty, Rita Duffy, John Kindness, Locky Morris, Philip Napier, and Paul Seawright for their sensitivity to this volatile time of political and nationalistic conflict. Although





Left: Rita Duffy, *The Souvenir Shop*, 2017. Functioning shop with original artwork and multiples for sale, installation view. Below: Ursula Burke, *Embroidery Frieze (The Politicians)*, 2015. Embroidery thread on stretched cotton, dimensions variable. Both from “so it is.”

work has addressed the conflict in Northern Ireland as well as other wars around the world; in recent years, he has turned to military recruitment and the reporting of foreign wars in U.S. media. The gloomy urban views shown here were shot during his interviews with veterans in Pittsburgh.

Burke's *Embroidery Frieze (The Politicians)* astutely employed the elegant craft techniques of “women's work” to comment on male power and identity in global politics. Eight sizeable hand-embroidered panels, hung across a wall, depicted scenes of politicians from around the world caught in the act of fighting in office. She explains that she used “a medieval palette of colored threads [that] spill out of the interior frame, where the anxious battle for power is trying frantically to be contained, and out onto the floor, referring to the dissolution of that power.” In a second installation, *The Precariat*, Burke placed black and white porcelain busts on black pedestals. Though referencing Roman portraiture (and its use as a tool to legitimize imperial authority), these portraits reject the heroic and powerful in favor of a darker side of revolution and conflict. The nameless faces are bruised and injured, as though victims of abusive power.

Napier's intriguing *Further Progress (Champagne and Argonne)*, consisted of adapted banner stands, panoramic prints, and car headlights disclosing inverted landscapes. Viewers had to traverse the space in order to see the suspended panels, each one with cut holes emitting light. The pictures portrayed sites in France

the work here was not directly about the Troubles, it was nevertheless informed by suffering and pain.

Entering the 1414 building, one stepped directly into Duffy's *The Souvenir Shop*, an installation commemorating the 1916 Easter Rising. Known for multimedia work that touches on Irish identity, history, and politics, Duffy created an environment that resembled a store in which historical, political, and social

events and people were redrafted into thought-provoking everyday commodities (the site was once the only grocery store in the vicinity of the Mattress Factory). Cognizant of Warhol's use of pop culture, Duffy made multiples in the form of soap bars, flags, buttons, mugs, china, chocolate bars, and pillows decorated with images of guns, napkins, and political figures of every stripe; there were even voodoo-style dolls of

Trump, complete with pins. Everything in the shop was for sale. An interesting contradiction flourished in this satirical setting, which was permeated, on the one hand, by humor, and on the other, by a restraining seriousness.

Seawright's installation, *They Dropped Like Flakes, They Dropped Like Stars*, featured somber black and white, large-scale photographs shot mostly in Braddock. Seawright's







Left: David Shrigley, *The Life Model*, 2012. Mixed media, dimensions variable. Bottom left: He Xiangyu, *The Death of Marat*, 2011. Fiberglass and silica gel, installation view. Both from “Juxtapoz x Superflat.”



where the 28th Infantry Division conducted operations in World War I. Napier’s great-uncle Jonathan Napier, who was killed at the Battle of Passchendaele in Belgium in 1917, inspired this work.

The artists featured in “so it is” grapple intelligently with the unsettling character of violent conflict and its damage to society. Unlike many other exhibitions devoted to political issues, this show was not overt, blatant, or ideologically illustrative; instead, its understated works inspired reflection while calling attention to tragedy in a far more nuanced manner.

—Elaine A. King

#### VANCOUVER

##### “Juxtapoz x Superflat”

##### Vancouver Art Gallery

“Juxtapoz x Superflat,” a group exhibition of 36 international artists organized by Kaikai Kiki Co., Ltd

and co-curated by Japanese artist Takashi Murakami and Evan Pricco, editor-in-chief of *Juxtapoz Art & Culture Magazine*, premiered as a four-day pop-up show at Pivot Art + Culture in Seattle; it then had a three-month run at the Vancouver Art Gallery. The show, which was conceived by Murakami, expanded on his 2001 “Superflat” exhibition at the Los Angeles Museum of Contemporary Art to include artists who have been featured in *Juxtapoz*, a publication known for promoting underground and alternative contemporary art. What unified this wide-ranging exhibition of many mediums and stylistic idioms was the curators’ practice of dissolving distinctions between fine art, design, graphic arts, craft, and commercial art to showcase works that were by turns quirky, assertive, colorful, narrative, sleek, crude, humorous, cute, irreverent, and subversive.

The sculptural objects were accordingly diverse, ranging from the cartoony mixed-media *Mound #1*, *The Legend* by Trenton Doyle Hancock (part of his ongoing tale of “The Mounds” and their eventual triumph of good over evil) to Parra’s *Anxiety*, a sleek, pink, anthropomorphized rabbit whose candy-sweet color and smooth, shiny surface contrast with its anguished pose. There was a wall of painted vintage skateboards by GATS sporting his signature graffiti masked figures, as well as playful ceramic sculptures of various sizes and textures by Otani Workshop that formed a curious and often whimsical mix of references to popular culture, mythology, and ancient tomb sculptures.

The most startling and subversive work was He Xiangyu’s *Death of Marat*, a realistic life-size figure of Ai Weiwei lying face down on a platform as if dead. The title draws

a connection between Ai’s politically engaged work and actions, which have so far resulted only in his harassment, and the fate of the radical 18th-century French journalist and politician Jean-Paul Marat, whose murder was immortalized in Jacques-Louis David’s painting.

At the other end of the spectrum, David Shrigley’s campy *Life Model* featured an over-life-size male nude, with huge ears and nose, positioned in the center of a gallery set up as a drawing studio. Visitors were invited to sit down at easels and sketch the model; their efforts were periodically displayed on the surrounding walls. To add to the absurdity, every few minutes, this sculptural “life” model blinked his eyes and urinated into a metal pail at his feet.

The sculptures with the most magnetic allure were Elisabeth Higgins O’Connor’s three giant animal-like figures, which looked like escapees from a demonic fairy tale. Sporting enormous heads on tenuous bodies, a barking fox, downcast mule, and dog-like prancing creatures were fashioned from an assortment of found and scavenged materials, including Styrofoam, lumber, bed sheets, paper, cardboard, string, afghans, pins, and paint, in what O’Connor calls “an aesthetic of buildup and erosion.” Cobbled together and fragile, like survivors in need of repair, they were simultaneously imposing, frightening, and even threatening. These over-size, poignant, humanoid critters were a riveting and fitting contribution to an exhibition celebrating popular culture with an anything-goes sensibility.

—Rachel Rosenfield Lafo

## DISPATCH

### VENICE

#### Venice Biennale

Christine Macel, curator of the Centre Pompidou and of “Viva Arte Viva,” the 57th International Exhibition, describes art as a force for life: “Art in itself helps us to navigate in these times; its very existence is a resistance in itself... Contemporary art cannot be understood as mere representation or imitation: it is a reality *tout court*, an instrument of inquiry, both of the creative process and of the different questions pertaining to Humankind and the world.”

Macel’s selection of Carolee Schneemann for the Golden Lion Lifetime Achievement Award, based in part on a career devoted to pioneering performances and installations probing the relationship between the body and freedom, coupled with Tehching Hsieh’s representation of Taiwan and the guidelines of “Viva Arte Viva,” suggest that Venice in 2017 might be a fertile field for an investigation into the theme of the body as art. But the show, which does not disappoint, is more than that. It is the task of sculpture to produce spatial experiences, and many of the artists question the position of the body in contemporary space, considering it in relation to bio-politics and control structures, machines and media, and the body politic. For Schneemann, “It was in the body that the energy and the confirmation of what I’d seen and lived was coherent. That was an area that hadn’t been colonized.” For Hsieh, who specializes in physical pain and endurance, performance becomes a form of education and a path to empathy. The deprivations and hardships to which he subjects himself are no different than what



many people call life—clocking in, living outside without shelter, seeking privacy under constant surveillance.

Anne Imhof’s brilliant *Faust* (2017, German Pavilion) was awarded the Golden Lion for best national participation. As described by curator

Susanne Pfeffer, “*Faust* is both a five-hour production and a seven-month-long scenario comprised of performative dynamics, sculptural installations, painterly touches, and rigorously choreographed visual axes and movements that encompass the entire pavilion...the bound-

aries of the space disclose everything, making it both visible and subject to control. The heightened floor elevates bodies and modifies spatial proportions. Next to us, below us, above us, there are the bodies of individuals, the bodies of the many.” Imhof’s approach to the



Above: Anne Imhof, *Faust*, 2017.

Right: Jesse Jones, *Tremble Tremble*, 2017.





**Left:** Mark Bradford, interior view of *Process Collettivo*, 2017. **Below:** Peju Alatise, *Flying Girls*, 2016.

space of the German Pavilion, which was redesigned by the Nazis in 1938, is fascinating. She is not the first artist to confront the massive scale and stark appearance head-on. I was reminded of Hans Haacke's *Germania* (1993), in which he uprooted and

smashed the marble floor tiles. Haacke was one of the first artists to treat a national pavilion as a subject of inquiry, rather than just an exhibition space.

By inserting an elevated glass platform, Imhof alters the proportions

between body and space, creating an emotional experience that plays out by standing above and on bodies. This element intertwines two architectures of power, since clear glass is the material of choice whenever architecture is about money and

power. According to Imhof, "Only by forming an association of bodies, only by occupying space can resistance take hold. On the balustrades and fences, underground and on the roof, the performers conquer and occupy the room, the house, the pavilion, the institution, the state."

Outside, Dobermans stand guard. Imhof links dog and man as undergoing a shared transformation. As I entered the pavilion, my memory of the dogs' movements translated to the gestures and movement of the performers in the space beneath my feet. While I see Imhof's work as sculpture, she defines it as a process of becoming a picture. Each picture however, depends on interaction with the viewer: "A picture doesn't work without the person looking at it."

Jesse Jones's *Tremble Tremble* (2017, Pavilion of Ireland) was inspired by the death of Savita Halappanavar, a young Indian dentist living in Ireland, who died when she was denied a life-saving abortion because her fetus had a "heartbeat." Her death sparked a protest movement to amend the Irish Constitution and give women control over their own bodies. Jones, whose work focuses on political and social histories embedded within everyday life, considers the national pavilion as the site of an alternative law. Her title was inspired by the wages-for-housework movement in Italy in the 1970s, during which women chanted, "*Tremate, tremate, le streghe sono tornate!*" ("Tremble, tremble, the witches have returned!"). Emerging from the current social movement in Ireland, the work calls for a transformation of the relationship between church and state while furthering Jones's interest in those moments when hidden histories come to the surface, as in demon-



TOP: JOSHUA WHITE, COURTESY THE ARTIST AND HAUSER & WIRTH / BOTTOM: UGOCHUKWU BENSON IBEABUCHI FOR THE NIGERIAN PAVILION

strations and strikes. As a potential catalyst in this change, Jones proposes the return of the witch as a feminist archetype and disrupter with the potential to transform reality. *Tremble Tremble* is accompanied by a sound score composed by Susan Stenger, who creates what she calls “sonic reactions.”

*Right Here, Right Now* (2017), Qudus Onikeku’s contribution to the inaugural Nigerian Pavilion (which also featured Peju Alatise’s dramatic *Flying Girls*, 2016), uses performance and dance in live and film versions to shape a cultural and national identity outside the colonialist narrative that has defined the country. Like Schneemann, Onikeku considers the body to be the one thing untouched by colonialism. As he sees it, the mind was “dented” by education, and the soul by imposed religion, but the body remained untouched, because even when submitted to pain the body gets stronger. Onikeku’s work tries to address this through choreographies that free the body from history, using dance to evoke a visceral response and trigger memories for audience members.

Olafur Eliasson’s *Green light—An artistic workshop*, part of “Viva Arte Viva” in the Central Pavilion, involves 40 individuals from a range of countries—including Nigeria, Gambia, Syria, Iraq, Somalia, Afghanistan, and China—who have signed up as participants through nine local partnering NGOs based in the municipality of Venice. Divided into two teams, they take part for up to two months in the artistic project, as well as in a shared learning program, which offers free access to all its activities. Participants lead the daily lamp-building workshops, acting as hosts in the Green Light space and engaging with visitors.

Eliasson describes *Green light* as “a space of individual and collective ‘world-making’ that...spreads out into society at large.” He sees its “multi-



layered hospitality” as testing “alternative models of community. [It] is an act of welcoming, addressed both to those who have fled hardship and instability in their home countries and to the residents of the cities receiving them.” Like Thomas Hirschhorn and his *Gramsci Monument* in the Bronx, Eliasson and *Green light* have been the targets of extensive criticism. What, for some, seems altruistic and consciousness-raising can also appear exploitative, slumming with the “other” under the auspices of politically correct art. There is a kind of voyeurism and “colonialism” at work in turning immigrants into performers and placing them on display for collectors. *Green light* might have aspired to Gramsci’s idea of a “counter-hegemonic” struggle—advancing alternatives to dominant ideas of what is normal and legitimate—but that notion has trouble translating into art. Many in the art world agree with Hirschhorn’s assessment that the project itself is enough: “Art—because it’s Art—is resistance as such. Resistance to aesthetical, cultural, political habits.”

Mark Bradford’s involvement with local communities in Venice stands in stark contrast. In conjunction with *Tomorrow is Another Day*, his U.S. Pavilion installation, he has embarked on a six-year collaboration with the Venetian nonprofit social cooperative Rio Terà dei Pensieri, which provides employment opportunities to incarcerated men and women and supports their re-integration into society. *Process Collettivo* aims to launch a sustainable long-term program that raises awareness of both the penal system and the success of the social cooperative model. Motivated by an inquiry into “need” and “research into access,” Bradford’s pluralistic and inclusive vision of the world redefines what it means to be an artist and a citizen. Perhaps it is no accident that his project grew from listening to the needs of the participants (and not the other way around), given his own experiences as a gay African American.

“Viva Arte Viva,” though less stridently political than past installations of the biennial, still makes bold claims for art. From the individual to the collective, to the social

#### Olafur Eliasson, *Green light—An artistic workshop*, 2017.

body politic, it celebrates the revolutionary and liberating potential of art. The question, as always, is who benefits. Paolo Barrata, president of the Biennale, invoked the old idea of humanism: “We decided it would be useful to dedicate this edition to a reflection which, while starting from a vision of the world as a place of conflict and falsity, shows the work of the artist as an act of freedom and resistance...This humanism, through art, celebrates mankind’s ability to avoid being dominated by the powers governing world affairs, which if left to their own devices can greatly affect the human dimension.” Reinterpreting what some might consider an outmoded idea in the face of today’s violence, inequality, and upheaval is not without relevance: Italian Renaissance art and philosophy—both spurred on by humanism—were the products of a time just like ours; one can only hope that the benefits of art reach beyond the patrons, the star artists, and the cognoscenti this time around.

—Barbara T. Hoffman