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Christine Macel talks with Michelle Kuo about the 57th Venice Biennale



Dawn Kasper, *& sun & or THE SHAPE OF TIME*, 2014, Performance view, David Lewis Gallery, New York, April 29, 2014, Dawn Kasper, Photo: Adam Reich

OPENING ON MAY 13, the Fifty-Seventh Venice Biennale will take place amid roiling geopolitical waters—and massive shifts regarding the production of objects, ideas, and selves. Curator Christine Macel talked with *Artforum* editor Michelle Kuo about artistic process and the trajectory of the world's biggest exhibition.

MICHELLE KUO: Your title for the Biennale, “*Viva Arte Viva*,” literally places art at the center of life.

CHRISTINE MACEL: The exhibition puts art and the artist first. Everything in the show has been deduced from this starting point.

By contrast, most Biennales begin with a theme, and the selection of the artists follows. Often, I think, the concept is too wide, and so the show becomes impossibly broad; in Venice, where the venues cover fifty thousand square feet, it's even more difficult to create something coherent. But on the other hand, if you choose a very specific theme, the artists lose the freedom they need to make their work and to have a genuine dialogue with the curator; the process becomes too autocratic.

So instead of choosing a single theme, I worked closely

with the artists to develop thinking about their practices. The way they make their art. The position they have chosen. Their surroundings—from the material, like their studio, to the intellectual: their inspiration, knowledge, research, influences.

Then I asked each artist to send me documentation: images, book lists, even personal statements. This was the beginning of my research for the exhibition and catalogue, and it has culminated in a series of videos I've asked each artist to make about his or her practice. One has been posted every day on the Biennale website since February; they will also be on view in the exhibition itself.

And so the show intimately explores the position of the artist, their studio, history, milieu, and so on. It's like being at the level of the subject itself, being with the artist in their own sphere.

MK: But this isn't about re-creating the studio in the exhibition.

CM: Right—the first part of the show, in fact, is about inviting the artist to make works that deal with the idea of the studio, or that make it understandable.

MK: It's a reflection on these conditions, not a re-creation of them.

CM: Take, for example, Dawn Kasper: Much of her work has explicitly been about her studio practice.

MK: Her performances often stage her own process.

CM: In fact, she proposed to stay in Venice for six months, which is crazy, as you might imagine. She moved in, and she will really make this lived experience visible. Or take Olafur Eliasson, who is showing a huge piece about his own equally huge workshop and laboratory. It's about different approaches to production.

MK: And nonproductivity.

CM: I'm very interested in the tension in the artist's life between production and self-reflection, moments of otium, to use the Latin term. *Otium* is often improperly translated as “leisure,” but it really designates a kind of free time, a moment of idleness, a nonactivity that is also somehow generative, in which you are basically nourishing yourself.

In the classical tradition, *otium* was seen as a necessity in everyday life, in balance with *negotium*, which is

improperly translated today as “business” but which really means the world of the polis. Politics in the noble sense: being responsible for public life, for the interest of the commons.

This dialectic between interior and exterior, inaction and action, individual and communal—how you balance these two opposing poles—is a problem for every artist now. For example, Franz West made a very clear statement about the necessity of being lazy, of hanging out and having conversations and being nonproductive. The idea of *otium* challenges definitions of productivity and nonproductivity in relation to work and its consequences for the capitalist system. It questions work as the central activity of society, and it questions the experience of leisure, or entertainment, a time that is not work but that is nevertheless still capitalized: spending money. In a way, these ideas link with Okwui [Enwezor]’s 2015 Biennale.

MK: And this form of free time goes against the speed or acceleration of production today. You have someone like Kasper committing to be there for six months—a rare long-term unfolding of a project.

CM: There will be several artists and groups that will be there for extended periods. For example, Lee Mingwei has also organized a performance for six months. The show doesn’t just focus on single events, but on real time-based processes.

MK: You’ll also be staging what you call the Tavola Aperta, or Open Table, with artists—regular meals set outside, where anyone can come and join.

CM: When I first encountered the art world, it was very common to go to a restaurant and talk about art and so on. Now that’s a bit lost. So I had a very simple idea: Every Friday and Saturday, we’ll have lunch. Almost all the artists have agreed to participate, which is amazing. The meals will be outdoors when it’s sunny, in the garden of the Central Pavilion. Some will take place in the new rooms that we’ve restored in the Arsenale. I’ve invited all the artists of the national pavilions, too, to participate. It becomes a kind of studio visit, helping to reconnect with the voice of the artist, so that not only I a curator may hear it but also the general public. It’s part of trying to change the hierarchy of exhibition and artist, artist and audience.

I don’t think of these engagements as biographical. I think they produce new material to be analyzed further. Like building an archive that can continue after the exhibition, giving us more tools to understand the diversity of practices that inform the making of artworks themselves.

MK: The surround.

CM: It’s part of the work, too. You cannot separate the work and the practice. This is why I’ve ultimately constructed the show as a passage from interiority to infinity: nine pavilions that go from the most intimate di-

mensions of affect to the most distant dimensions, to the spiritual and scientific.

I want this exhibition to be a journey, a progression. I want you to finish it with something like a transformation in yourself.

MK: That relates to your idea of a neohumanism, or a reinvention of humanism, which is a fascinating move in this day and age, as opposed to forms of antihumanism or even posthumanism.

CM: I think it’s a recognition of, and a reaction to, the failure of Enlightenment and of the utopias of the 1960s and ’70s. The failing of one world, and the passage into a new one that has been described, for example, by [sociologist] Zygmunt Bauman as “liquid modernity.” We live in a time with an increasing feeling of uncertainty, a chaotic version of modernity. Now, the “liquid” man has to make choices all the time, to constantly adapt, to be a nomad without solid commitments.

To challenge this reality, I’m interested in how the individual artist develops in history and how we can reinvent ways of looking at the contemporary through the historical lens. For each pavilion, I’ve chosen specific figures who function as historical anchors: artists who either were forgotten too early, can be reconsidered now, or resonate with contemporary ideas and artists. For example, for the Pavilion of Artists and Books, I chose John Latham, for all his works on publications; I chose Tibor Hajas, an amazing Hungarian artist, for the Pavilion of Joys and Fears; the Italian artist Maria Lai, whom I exhibited in 2015 in the show “*Nel Mezzo del Mezzo: Arte Contemporanea nel Mediterraneo*” [In the Middle of the Middle: Contemporary Art in the Mediterranean] in Palermo, Sicily, for the Pavilion of the Common; and the Japanese group the Play for the Pavilion of the Earth. Rather than simply burrowing into the past, to me the question is, What have we done, and what can we do now?

MK: What models can actually be reanimated.

CM: Not just in the political or the social spheres, but in individual experience.

MK: It’s as if, after so many decades of antihumanism, we have to discover a different way to think about the problem of the individual—that isn’t a return to old, naive ideas about the subject, but that recognizes humans are still around. We’re still here, and we’re still obviously experiencing the world through the prism of our own subjectivity.

CM: Yes. How can we understand individuality and the individual subject now? How can we reinvent a new humanism after its failure? I believe in strong individualities, and that’s why I have chosen artists who are so different, but who each bring a specific and strong energy.

MK: And in the Pavilion of the Earth, you scale up that question, exploring how the individual relates to the

vastness of the earth, or, more properly, the Anthropocene.

CM: I conceived of the Pavilion of the Earth because all the artists I’ve chosen were concerned about this on some level. Some are more activist; some simply are taking nature as an environment in which to perform.

We’ll reactivate some practices from the end of the 1960s and the early ’70s. One key set of works will be by the Slovenian group OHO [founded in 1966, based in Kranj and Ljubljana until 1971]. Early on, they were forming communities and living in nature—creating performances and raising ecological concerns. They were hippies, of a kind. And they later disbanded, but all the members remain concerned about the same issues. It was not fashion. They hoped to link nature to community and insisted on its balance with the individual. It was not Land art. They addressed nature in a much more esoteric and spiritual way.

MK: Did they build structures?

CM: Their work was ephemeral—even seasonal. I will show “Summer Projects” [1969], which they did in the summer by going out in the fields, with water, stringing plastic bags or even toilet paper in the trees. It was informal and never resulted in stable objects or documentary forms. Similarly, the Play will enact one of their pieces from the 1970s. They will build a house by the Arsenale, floating on the canal.

And a younger artist, Sam Lewitt, will be dealing with electricity and energy. Enel, a company that produces electricity and was also the first sponsor of the Biennale, agreed to loan some of their historical lamps to be scanned and modeled by the artist, which will produce a vibrant work.

MK: How will these restagings relate to the new performances throughout the Biennale?

CM: Every hour during the opening days you will have something to see. Performances by Anna Halprin, Ernesto Neto, Mondrian Fan Club, Mariechen Danz, Nevin Aladag, Paulo Bruscky, etc. These will also be live-streaming on the website of the Biennale and projected in a room in the Arsenale. I want everyone to be able to see them *live* and also to find them afterward in our archives.

Duration itself is the focus of the end of the exhibition, which finishes with the Pavilion of Time and Infinity. Some of the works here will be process-based, like that of Edith Dekyndt, who is obsessed with repetition and variation, memory and difference. She will mount a performance in which someone tries to put dust in a rectangle, but the rectangle is delineated by a light that constantly moves. Over six months, the performer will have to continuously remake the rectangle. So at the very end of the exhibition, you are confronted with an endless loop—an eternal return.