

ARTFORUM

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DOUBLE VISION

RALPH RUGOFF TALKS WITH DANIEL BIRNBAUM



Alex Da Corte, Rubber Pencil Devil, 2018, HD video, color, sound, 175 minutes 52 seconds.

THE FIFTY-EIGHTH VENICE BIENNALE opens May 11 to a world riven by powerful disinformation campaigns and tipping toward reactionary crisis. The Biennale’s artistic director, Ralph Rugoff, discussed the exhibition—and the palliative potential of art’s world-building powers—with Artforum contributing editor Daniel Birnbaum, who in 2009 organized the Biennale’s fifty-third edition.

Ralph Rugoff: There’s something about this exhibition you may not know, which is that there will actually be two exhibitions: “Proposition A,” at the Arsenale, and “Proposition B,” in the Central Pavilion. The exhibitions will be distinct—very different atmospheres. But they both feature the exact same list of artists.

Daniel Birnbaum: Everyone has a double presence.

RR: Exactly. However, the artists will show different types of work in each space. This comes from a desire to not only highlight the multiplicity of artists’ practices, but to point to our polarized world, where people inhabit separate information landscapes.

DB: Maybe you can say a few words about the title.

RR: The saying “May you live in interesting times”—supposedly an ancient Chinese curse—was first printed in English in 1936, when Sir Austen Chamberlain, a British member of Parliament, referred to it in a speech, claiming he’d heard it from a British diplomat who had served in China. But the curse is fictitious—it’s made up, fake news. Albert Camus, too, refers to this ancient Chinese curse. Arthur C. Clarke, the science-fiction writer, as well. Robert F. Kennedy used it in a famous speech in South Africa. And Hillary Rodham Clinton cites it in her autobiography. For a counterfeit proverb, it has had an incredible life.

DB: Are they all aware of its being fake?

RR: No, no. They’re all quoting it as if it were real. Now, of course, you can go online and find out in two minutes that it’s fake. But for many years this fabricated cultural artifact has had an active life in public discourse. The saying’s strange history underscores the fact that “fake

news” has real material effects. It influences elections, and in the UK, it was a major factor contributing to Brexit. Its rising importance creates a new framework to think about art’s historical role in challenging established truths and points of view.

What happens when actual heads of state are using tools borrowed from postmodern thinkers to discredit things like climate change? I was influenced by Bruno Latour’s prescient 2004 essay “Why Has Critique Run Out of Steam? From Matters of Fact to Matters of Concern,” where he talks about climate-change deniers discrediting climate science by saying there’s no scientific certainty. Of course, Latour spent his career attacking the rhetoric of scientific certainty.

DB: Do you think there’s a relationship between what’s going on today and the 1930s?

RR: I certainly do. And it’s a depressing, very alarming thought. However, I wanted to find a way to address this precarious moment without being pessimistic. Hence the neutrality of the title. Is it a curse to live in interesting times? Or is it a blessing?

DB: Your official statement argues that art and politics are separate, that art doesn’t exercise its force in the domain of politics. But there’s a sense that art can change one’s worldview, which then becomes part of one’s political view. Isn’t that, indirectly, “politics”?

RR: Mike Kelley had a great phrase, “negative joy.” This was how he thought of art’s social function. Art provides pleasure at the same time that it enables critical insight. And to me, that’s very important. If you have critical insight but no pleasure, you’re only talking to people who don’t care about pleasure. It’s a dead end.

DB: You’ve also spoken generally about play and playfulness. Could you speak more about this?

RR: Art is an arena where play is more open-ended—less prescribed, less formulaic—than in other areas of culture. I also think that it’s about playing with the audience. If you want to reach beyond a group of art-world insiders, art has to be entertaining. The word has bad connotations in parts of the art world, because people associate entertainment with commercial media. But I think artists have different ways of entertaining us and different ways of playing. We entertain ideas. Entertaining suggests an openness. And obviously there’s such a thing as serious play.

DB: Another word you use that we don’t often see is happiness.

RR: Exactly. Happiness, too, is a complex thing. There’s the simplistic idea of happiness, which is inculcated into us when we’re children. But happiness can also come from feeling connected. I think that’s something people experience when they’re engaged with works of art that are interested in their response.

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DB: You also state that, in the end, maybe it’s not about the actual objects that are shown; rather, it’s about the conversations, and that has something to do with us having the capacity to be fulfilled or even happy.

RR: I love art because it offers complex, moving, and thought-provoking experiences I don’t find anywhere else. But my greatest hope for any exhibition is that people take their experience of it with them when they leave. We’ve all had those moments when you emerge from an exhibition and somehow you’re seeing the world through someone else’s eyes, noticing things you’d never noticed, because of the work you’ve just seen. Maybe you’re making mental connections you didn’t make before. And that enlarges your world.

RR: Divisions, walls, and barriers of different kinds are motifs that recur in the exhibition. For example, Teresa Margolles will present *Muro Ciudad Juárez, 2010*, a wall taken from a site in Ciudad Juárez, Mexico, where a group of teenagers were murdered. The bullet holes on its surface testify to the epidemic of drug violence in that country.

A number of projects also explore alternative or mirror worlds. Dominique Gonzalez-Foerster will show *Cosmorama, 2018*, a diorama of a Martian landscape she made with Joi Bittle, at a moment when some high-profile tech entrepreneurs are revisiting the idea of colonies on Mars. And Stan Douglas will present a new film about quantum entanglement set across two parallel worlds. Two astronauts take off on journeys to different planets and something strange happens.

A key reference point for me has been *The City & the City*, a 2009 book by the British science-fiction writer China Miéville. Two metropolises occupy the same footprint, but the governments of each prohibit their residents from acknowledging the people who live in the other city. So they've learned to unsee their neighbors. Of course, we all create separate realities by refusing to pay attention to certain aspects of our environment. Most city dwellers block out the homelessness they see, the poverty, the things the police or government might be doing. Through selective perception, we create walls around us all the time.

DB: I remember, maybe twenty years ago, there were suddenly lots of artists from Asia, primarily China, in the Biennale, and Westerners were all surprised. Now it would be impossible to imagine a Biennale where there wasn't an artist from every continent.

RR: I think a lot of artists are looking at that interconnectedness. It's something that appears in the drawings of, say, Otobong Nkanga, with these perforated lines that suggest relationships among things in very different areas. But these connections also happen across time: Hito Stereyl will present a new installation that focuses on Leonardo da Vinci's invention of the submarine, which he never published in his lifetime for ethical reasons. He worried the Venetian navy would use it to slaughter people. We're facing similar conflicts over technology today, including the development of AI. Technology seems to move forward without human agency, as if it has a destiny of its own, but of course we are continually making decisions that contribute to its "progress."

DB: Seventy-nine artists is a relatively limited number.

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RR: I think this might be the lowest number of artists in a very long time. Still, organizing a show this complex, in a short period has felt a bit like driving a truck without brakes down a curving mountain road at night. My primary concern with this exhibition has been to highlight art's multivalence, and this includes the multiplicity of practices and approaches that a single artist's work draws on. It was only possible to do this by having fewer artists—and besides, how many artists can you possibly keep in your head as a visitor to an exhibition? The overarching ambition of many biennials with countless artists in them makes for shows that are impossible to digest or respond to in any meaningful way.

DB: Is there anything else important we should mention?

RR: The rotunda in the Central Pavilion is usually the first room that people go into. It's a grand octagonal room with a high domed ceiling covered in a faux-Renaissance mural. We've decided to block off the entrance to this room from the foyer, meaning visitors can only enter the exhibition by going through corridors to either the left or the right. There will be a work in the rotunda by Cyprien Gaillard, a holographic sculpture of an angel based on a painting by Max Ernst that he completed in 1937, after the beginning of the Spanish Civil

War. He was very depressed about the rise of fascism. The angel figure seemed to be an angel of doom, foretelling the future conflagration in Europe. So this work brings back a dark history that is haunting us again now. Hopefully, our times will prove interesting enough that it won't be repeated.



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Ralph Rugoff talks with Daniel Birnbaum
about the 58th Venice Biennale



Mike Kelley, *Bubba/Pavel/Pavel*, 2018. HD video, color, sound, 170 minutes, 52 seconds.

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DB: Beyond your original idea of breaking the show into two parts, I'm curious if there are other themes? Are there subshows nested inside the shows?

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Left: Dominique Gonzalez-Foerster with Joi Bittle, *Cosmorama* (detail), 2018, mixed media, 9' 10" x 26' 3". Photo: Nicholas Knight.
Right: Zanete Muhohi, *Bona*, Charlottesville, Virginia, 2015, gelatin silver print, 31 1/2" x 19 1/4".

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