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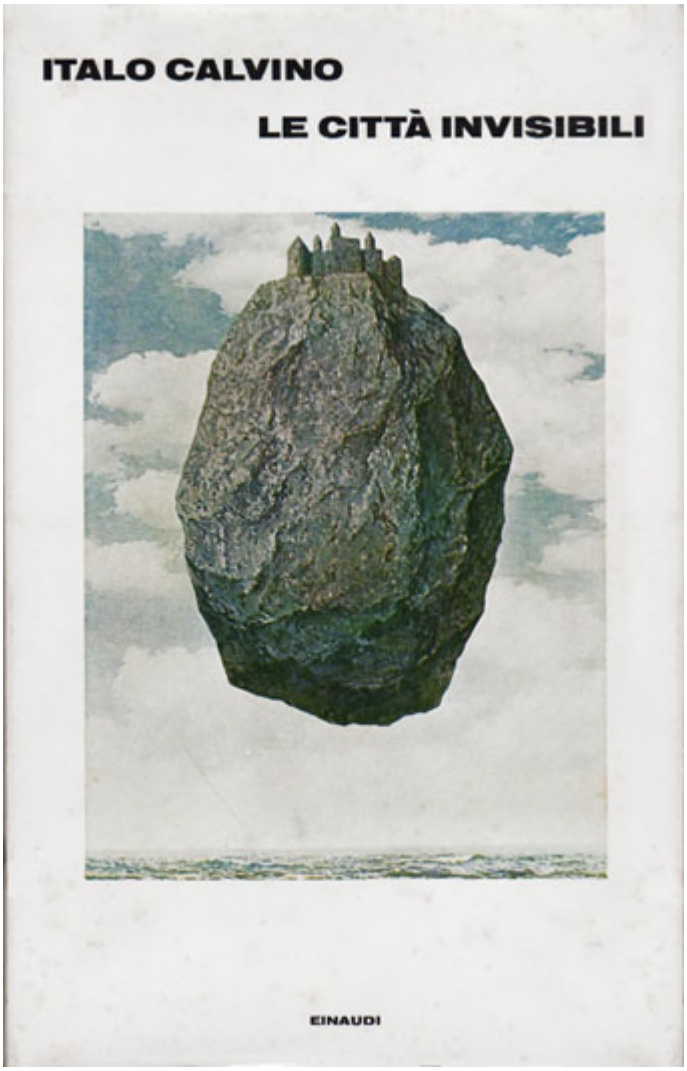
2018 SUMMER SEASON: BALERMIN

Julia Moritz

Is it possible to grasp a large-scale group exhibition based on a single artwork? This is the question posed by curator and critic Julia Moritz in her series of experimental reviews titled «Pick a Piece.» To Moritz, responding to the mushrooming of mega-exhibitions with the sturdy format of the art review means radical choice: to (en)counter the explosion of exhibitions with the implosion of inspection, with the selection of just one piece – this time from this summer's art fairs and biennials in Basel, Palermo, and Berlin.



BERLERSEL – that's the name of the game this 2018 summer art season in Europe: the grand openings of the 10th Berlin Biennale, the yearly round of art fairs and awards in Basel, and Manifesta 12 in Palermo chased one another – cities melting into each other – and still chase us around (on view through early September in Berlin, and November in Palermo). We started our grand tour in Switzerland first, thus making the art circuit's BERLERSEL our BALERMIN, our imaginary city in June, with the pick-a-piece selection of one work per destination: Hannah Weinberger's *Hidden Bar* in Basel, Wu Ming 2's *Viva Menilicchi!* in Palermo, and Sondra Perry's I*T'S IN THE GAME '17* in Berlin.



Italo Calvino, *Le città invisibili*, 1972, original edition,
Courtesy: Einaudi Editore; front cover by René Magritte,
The Castle in the Pyrenees, 1959, oil on canvas > hyperlink:
https://monoskop.org/images/0/0e/Calvino_Italo_Invisible_Cities.pdf
[https://monoskop.org/images/0/0e/Calvino_Italo_Invisible_Cities.pdf]

At the end of an eventful life, Italo Calvino published his seminal surrealist novel *Invisible Cities* (*Le città invisibili*, 1972) in which he reimagines *The Book of the Marvels of the World* (in Italian: *Il Milione*), the 13th-century travelogue of stories by the Venetian merchant and explorer Marco Polo about travels and his time with Mongolian emperor Kublai Khan, as a conversation between the two interspersed between prose poems about 55 fictitious towns delivered by Polo. When traveling from Basel to Palermo to Berlin, cities that are neither particularly marvelous nor, for that matter, invisible, I was struck by a sudden surrealism. But see/read for yourself – Calvino fantasy first:

Cities and the Sky

«This belief is handed down in Beersheba: that, suspended in the heavens, there exists another Beersheba, where the city's most elevated virtues and sentiments are poised, and that if the terrestrial Beersheba will take the celestial one as its model the two cities will become one. The image propagated by tradition is that of a city of pure gold, with silver locks and diamond gates, a jewel-city, all inset and inlaid, as a maximum of laborious study might produce when applied to materials of the maximum worth.»





Hannah Weinberger, *The Hidden Bar*, 2018, both photos: Marc Krebs

Besides its jewelry fair, and plenty of other high-end luxury wholesale, Basel has established its art fair, bluntly called Art, as the world's most important trading place for modern and contemporary art. Accompanied by the young art fair, Liste, and the local thrill, the Swiss Art Awards, among zillions of other art and social events, Art Basel might also stand out for the amount of accompanying anxieties: to sell first, to buy best, to shine bright, to smart out, etc. – to rest? Not really. And yet, there are heaps of chats to be had, toasts to be made, tears to be shed, etc. For this reason, Hannah Weinberger's bar is hidden this time around. And nails it: if the terrestrial Basel will take the celestial Art Basel as its model, the two cities will become one. Accordingly, the Basel-based artist – who is otherwise known for her rather abstract sound work, such as the sewage sound system *Down There* on «view» at the Parcours section of this year's fair, though she does have some experience in hosting pop-up restaurants during fair week (and then, of course, there is that naturally bucolic name, lol) – combines the otherworldly necessity to liaise with the terrestrial tradition of mingling. All of this modelled with mystery, though not without tongue in cheek: her bountiful network of cool local artists, yet no artist list; a top location atop the contemporary art hall (behind the large clock outside), yet no notice wheresoever. The blunt name of the bar reinforces the blunt method of mimicking the blunt mechanisms of the art-fair world, the social nature of speculative value: eat this cake, too, and sell it, too. Plus, you could actually afford not to starve. While you didsee a good deal of beaux-arts – for example, Emil Klein's fine red velvet curtain or an adorable Meret Oppenheim ashtray, and if the ingenious bubble-wrap seating was, in fact, art, it would be my favorite – and you did so while, most importantly, resting. In sum: fair and life became one.

Continuous Cities

> «Until you have reached this city you are outside it; you pass beneath an archway and you find yourself within the city its compact thickness surrounds you; carved in its stone there is a pattern that will be revealed to you if you follow its jagged outline. If this is what you believe, you are wrong: Penthesilea is different. … You ask for the road out of the city; you pass again the string of scattered suburbs like a freckled pigmentation; night falls; windows come alight, here more concentrated, sparser there. … The question that now begins to gnaw at your mind is more anguished: outside Penthesilea does an outside exist?»



Wu Ming, *Viva Menilicchi!*, 2018, mixed media, both photos: Wu Ming Foundation > hyperlink: www.wumingfoundation.com [http://www.wumingfoundation.com]

Manifesta, «the European Biennial,» which changes location with every edition, keeps coming back to this country. No. 7 took place in the very north of Italy, in the still bilingual Habsburgian Trentino-Alto Adige region. A decade later, the institution seizes the very south, the island of Sicily, Palermo. And they have learned from the trouble, from parachuting in to new places, new people, a whole new mosaic of new parameters for a successful exhibition time and again. The lesson learned seems simple: start ahead, speak local. And so a relatively large number of countrymen and -women and groups (given the relatively small number of contributions in total) are invited by the three groups of curatorial teams (now called «Creative Mediators») who remain relatively invisible. Among them, the collective of activists and writers called Wu Ming (formerly Luther Blissett), which formed in Bologna in the year 2000 and became recognized for their historical novels (published by Einaudi, which was also Calvino's publisher). Like their host biennial, the group´s individual components bear numbers: for Manifesta 12, Giovanni Cattabriga figures as Wu Ming 2. Depending on the Chinese pronunciation, the name means either «anonymous,» in solidarity with dissidents who seek anonymity for survival, or «five people,» to counter stardom individualism. Or

could it be that such continuous authorship was the result of a continuous city? Or was it the continuous people who demanded the continuous city in the first place? This could be the question of Wu Ming 2's project for Palermo, Viva Menilicchi! (2018), to be found at the biennial's box-office «headquarters» (one that consistently fails to provide orientation), the wonderfully derelict 1860s Teatro Garibaldi that also hosted the film and public programs, a bookshop, and the pre-biennial program «Aspettando Manifesta 12» (Waiting for Manifesta 12). There, Viva Menilicchi! figures as part of the exhibition's section «City on Stage,» featuring a city walk (scheduled for October 20 and not to be missed), a lyrical video, a cartographic installation, and a comprehensive booklet (in collaboration with the Palermo-based group Fare Ala). The whole work is part of the collective's long-term investigation of Italian colonialism (in Libya, Eritrea, Ethiopia, and Somalia) which parallels the theatre's lifespan. Or of postcolonial Italy, more precisely, including anti-colonial upheaval, which parallels the lifespan of colonialism, as evidenced by the battle cry «Long live Menilicchi!» of a 1890s anarchist demonstration in Palermo following the defeat of the Italian army by Ethiopian emperor Menelik II. For Palermo, and its iteration of «the European Biennial,» is different. It's thoughtful, engaging (here more concentrated, sparser there), with the notion of an outside (s)carefully skirted.

Hidden Cities

> «Having said this, I do not wish your eyes to catch a distorted image, so I must draw your attention to an intrinsic quality of the unjust Berenice germinating secretly inside the secret just Berenice: and this is the possible awakening – as if in an excited opening of windows – of a later love for justice, not yet subjected to rules, capable of reassembling a city still more just than it was before it became the vessel for injustice. But if you peer deeper into this new germ of justice you can discern a tiny spot that is spreading like the mounting tendency to impose what is just through what is unjust, and perhaps this is the germ of an immense metropolis.»





Sondra Perry, *IT'S IN THE GAME '17 or Mirror Gag for Vitrine and Projection*, 2017, video 16:21 min, video stills (by the author) > hyperlink: http://sondraperry.com/IT-S-IN-THE-GAME-17 [http://sondraperry.com/IT-S-IN-THE-GAME-17]

To say it's about racial justice would perhaps be unjust, at least to the wide array of the 10th Berlin Biennial's 46 contributors from all walks of life, and places. The decision for this considerably smaller number of artists (compared to the last edition's 120) might well be due to the fact that only very few of them (compared to any edition) are household names to the Euro-American art circuit (and therefore not easily ingested). As a matter of fact, what's often and awfully labelled «art world» could hardly be more removed from «world art» (as in «world music»), or a diasporic culture for that matter. And so head curator Gabi Ngcobo rightly points out that «We don't need another hero,» taking the Biennial's cue and title from Tina Turner's iconic song and indicating that mirroring the individual male art star model for her predominantly non-Euro-American roster is not the name of her game, too. Rather, the invitation here is to take time, the time it takes to view, decode, and reason with the works – which then again, even if behind a bit of an exotic veil, might turn out not to be poles apart after all. Take, for instance, Sondra Perry's *IT'S IN THE GAME '17* or *Mirror Gag for Vitrine and Projection* (2017) at Akademie der Künste (or for free on her extensive website): the impregnation of technology with blackness doesn't need to reside deep down afro-futurist fabulation only. It's Perry's actual brother, twin brother that is, who stars in her video work as … himself, a university team basketball player and involuntary model for video games, with other parties cashing in on his photogenic physicality. His case is contrasted, or rather likened, to indigenous African artifacts displayed in the vitrines of Western museums which Perry presents as blue screen animation free floating around the screen like video game avatars. All of this most suitably soundtracked by a version of Marvin Gaye and Diana Ross' uplifting duett «You Are Everything.» Tina, in turn, would nod from her Swiss residence: justice lies not in the hands of heroes, but right in front of your doorstep.

> … From my words you will have reached the conclusion that Balermin is a temporal succession of different cities, alternately just and unjust. But what I wanted to warn you about is something else: all the future cities are already present in this instant, wrapped one within the other, confined, crammed, inextricable.

JULIA MORITZ

Julia Moritz is a curator, art mediator and critic currently working at Berlin’s Gropius Bau and prior to that at Kunsthalle Zürich. Previously, she served as head of the Maybe Education and Public Programs for dOCUMENTA (13).

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