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DWINDLEMAINTAIN

The 58th International Art Exhibition of La Biennale di Venezia

Julia Moritz

The question posed by this column (which single work of a mega exhibition may capture best its overall idea?) is particularly challenging for the Venice Biennial – not just because of the urge to not comply with the lion share of visibility/capital and to not take sides for any of the by now more nostalgically embraced rather than officially dubious nationalist propaganda. The challenge, according to curator and critic Julia Moritz, is to look at the international group exhibition from a point of no return, the point of view of the one work – not necessarily the best work – that captures the exhibition «May You Live in Interesting Times» most poignantly, regarding its response to the location and context, for whatever that's worth.



Let’s face this fact: biennials are not about new discoveries. They were never meant to be. Instead, they are powerhouses of the chosen few. And sometimes the big-game art may allow the occasional emerging artist to bask in its reflected splendor; or it may gracefully re-illuminate the old and forgotten (as per a recent trend). As a matter of principle, La Biennale di Venezia cannot be an exception to this golden rule. It is the oldest of biennials, the grand dame on Canale Grande. It is based on the gospel of having each eligible nation nominate its best individual artist who then presents work in the prestigious national pavilion in the gated Giardini park (which was built for this purpose). This theme park of «the contemporary» is flanked by one of the largest curated themed exhibitions of present-day art at the Arsenale – a matter of honor, since 1895. A medal of honor, as those artists who created the works judged as best are honored with the Golden Lions.

Nairy Baghramian’s sculpture series «Dwindlers» may be welcomed as a stark contrast to this biennial’s persistent discourses of glorification – a perfect reason to take a look at it here, retrospectively, speculatively, and more closely. The «Dwindlers» seem to be conceived as beings or things that «decrease, diminish, degenerate, reduce in size or intensity, fall away in quality, bring low, lessen, shrink, or sink» (as a dictionary entry for «dwindling» has it). Paint, glass, zinced metal, and colored epoxy resin are the material forms they take to form a series of sculptures that sit high above the viewers’ heads. From up there, they seem to greet the heels of visitors on their seemingly endless voyage through the exterior corridor of the Arsenale building, from its entrance to only its first corner – and back again, should you be among the unlucky ones to miss a work, glove, or friend (and not count among the lucky ones chauffeured in golf-cart type of vehicles). It’s a site of precisely the kind of physical visitor exhaustion that motivated this «Pick a Piece» series with its focus on a single work in exhibitions that become ever vaster. It is here that your energy decreases, your motivation diminishes, your ambition degenerates, your water reserves reduce in size, everything you see starts to lose its intensity, or even fall away in quality, it brings you low, lessens your belief, shrinks your attention, and ultimately sinks into oblivion. And they saw it coming. Because the «Dwindlers» see you coming, long before you do, perched high above street light level. Their paint looks down on you as only paint can do; their glass mimics your thin-skinned system; their metal mocks you who are mere flesh and bones; and the dwindlers’ joints of colored epoxy resin tower over it all.

And yet, they have nothing to do with you. In a way, they have long left you behind and couldn’t care less, can’t be bothered. Who then, if not you/us, the viewers, is their business? The spouts, it seems simply. For the «Dwindlers’» shape and hanging mimics that of the water spouts of their host building. And this building is business indeed. It is Venice’s very own powerhouse. Bluntly named «Arsenale,» it used to be the place where the Venetian empire stored its arms. From this point of view, the «Dwindlers» appear like giant bullets, bazookas, or rockets, meant to decrease, diminish, degenerate, reduce in size or intensity, bring low, lessen, shrink, or sink – humanity as a whole. Their material alienness reaches beyond Baghramian’s wry anthropomorphismo, and out towards an imaginary cyborgian antagonist to us – even if this may just be our selves in the future.



Nairy Baghramian’s «Dwindlers» 2019

At the same time, they bear witness to whoever climbs up the water spout. For the «Dwindlers» may be more zoomorphic than anthropomorphic: their surface evokes chitin (the

armature of ants), their bodies are segmented like a centipede, and motionless like the mantis they cling to the wall. However, this ladder can't be climbed. For the «Dwindlers» are too fractured, fragile, forsaken. A ladder of bugs – just like the institution of this Biennale. There's hardly any "above" to it, no step up from here (or can you think of a more important award than a Golden Lion?). There is no outside ultimately, no sidestepping this watering hole (or have you heard of an artist declining to participate and still being heard of afterwards?).

It is here where Baghramian's subtle yet signature institutional critique comes to the fore. It's a strategy of critique she frequently adopts – think of her 2017 work «Beliebte Stellen / Privileged Points» for Sculpture Projects Münster (the outdoor mega exhibition with the megalomaniac decennial rhythm), where a black lacquered worm of bronze on lashing chains lurked in the courtyard of the baroque palace that serves as the headquarter of the region's main welfare institution (a meta-institution running schools, hospitals and museums). This strategy of critique also invariably seems to assume a certain sense of sympathy for its given site and conditions, which (from the perspective of orthodox, antagonistic critique) is sympathy for the devil, here in the guise of the dwindler. It is the Art object itself which ambivalently embodies the institution and devours its host site – not quite by biting the hand that feeds it, but with a good grim snoot.



Nairy Baghramian's «Dwindlers» 2017

Looking at the «Dwindlers», the material resonance of the work forces you to ask: What really is an institution? What more than a fractured grid or a structure of wrecking upward mobility? Or a verticality per se, endangered by the many horizontal semblances of the post-Fordist hegemon? On another note, would the first presentation of the work have raised the same questions when, in 2017 (think again, Sculpture Projects Münster), visitors at the mega Marian Goodman Gallery in New York more conveniently looked down on some «Dwindlers», encouraged by the accompanying handout to experience «a freeing of the assigned relationship between an object and its meaning»?



Nairy Baghramian «Dwindle Down» Installation at Marian Goodman Gallery, New York, 2017

Thankfully, we're not left alone with the dwindlers in Venice. Ralph Rugoff, the curator of «May You Live in Interesting Times,» has conceived an exhibition that parallels itself. The rule of this game: each participating artist gets to present work both in the Arsenale and the Central Pavilion of the Giardini. And so does Nairy. And this Central Pavilion, too, is a place of grand history: built as Palazzo dell'Esposizione, it initially served as a central pavilion for all participating countries, then became the Italian Pavilion when the number of countries and their representational demands outgrew the building capacity, and finally regained its centrality when the main curators' demands for the international exhibition grew, too. And in it's center, up a small flight of stairs, sit the «Maintainers» and unfold their peculiar centrality.



Nairy Baghramian’s «Maintainers» 2018

Those «Maintainers» may be welcomed as a contrast to the «Dwindlers.» They seem to be conceived as beings or things that continue, control, cultivate, retain size and intensity, manage quality, preserve, provide, sustain, or support.
Painted aluminum, cork, casted aluminum, Styrofoam and paraffin wax are the material forms they take to form a series of sculptures that sit on the gallery floor. From down there, they seem to greet the visitors’ heels on their seemingly endless voyage inside the labyrinthine walkways of the Central Pavilion, from its entrance to its core – and back again. It’s a site of precisely this kind of core gallery that fosters focus on a limited number of works amidst an exhibition that becomes ever vaster. It is here that your energy increases, your ambition improves, your understanding develops, your intellectual reserves grow in size or intensity, your nerves are strengthened, your mood is elevated, your capacity to linger is lengthened and you stretch your eye muscles or rise above your many weaknesses. And they saw you coming, just shortly before you do, squatting comfortably under what are already rather low-hanging paintings on the walls. It’s a bit like they look up to the paintings as only sculpture may do; their Styrofoam bodies mimic the solid substance you share with them within this space, while their near circular placement and candy-like coloring mimics a formation of toy soldiers defending sculpture as such against the seriousness of the surrounding paintings; supported by the symbolic signals which the «Maintainers’» synapses of cork receive from this Stonehengey flock of blocks.

Unlike the «Dwindlers,» the pendulum of ambivalence residing within Baghramian’s works seems to swing to the sympathy side with the «Maintainers.» And they have everything to do with you, too. Without you in the space, they don’t seem complete and perhaps cease to exist – like all Art and it’s institutions: without us around they are simply a pile of metal, a crappy building, or a tiny park in a fetid city. The «Maintainers» embrace us, along with their adjacent works, yet they don’t really invite us into their inner circle. The corporeality of their hardware seems to insist on a life of its own, indeed almost a room of one’s own. They relegate the paintings to a backdrop-like function, not only by oddly paralleling their formats

and rectangularity but also through their own painterly surfaces. From this point of view, the «Maintainers» appear like caretakers of centrality, infrastructural power plugs, or signposts towards immanence meant to continue, control, cultivate, retain size or intensity, manage quality, preserve, provide, sustain, or support – ensoulment. Their anthropomorphism (rather than zoomorphism) reaches beyond the sense of alienation of Baghramian's works out towards a heterotopian physicality – even if this may just be our selves in the past.



Nairy Baghramian's «Maintainers» 2018

Yet while the sympathy for the given site and its conditions seems rather evident with the «Maintainers», Baghramian's strategy of critique also invariably seems to assume a certain resistance to them, if only through the aforementioned inaccessibility of the installation as such. From the perspective of orthodox, social-democratic critique, this may be identified as a rather devilish move against immersion, inclusion, participation, and what not; Art's gatekeeping here comes in the guise of the maintainer – a maintainer of no less than the art world's status quo, if you wish. It is the very art object which ambivalently embodies this institution, it nourishes its host site by reserving an inner circle for itself – not quite eating the cake but certainly claiming to have it. It's a strategy of critique she frequently adopts – think of her 2002 work «The Iron Table» for documenta 14 (the mega-mega exhibition with the megalomaniac quintennial rhythm) shown in Kassel in 2017), where a red painted wooden boat (a recurring image in Baghramian's work) with metal burgees has stranded in the atrium of the historicist building of the Hessian State Museum. «In her short story The Iron Table (1943),» we are told by the documenta 14 website, «Jane Bowles [...] reshuffles the binary of here versus there, over and over, until not only ‹civilization› and ‹the desert› but the character's fantasies and desires are practically spaces themselves.»



Nairy Baghramian's «Maintainers» 2018

Looking back at the «Maintainers,» the uninhabitable anthropomorphism of the work forces you to ask: what really is a subject? What more than tumbleweed between worlds or an entity of wrecked mobility? Or a sociality per se, endangered by the many verticalities of the post-Fordist hegemon? On another note, would the first presentation of the work have raised the same questions – when in 2018 (just after 2017's grand tour) the Museum of Modern Art in New York had already acquired «Maintainers,» belying the good gallerist's observation that «In this exhibition [at Marian Goodman Gallery] the idea that one thing might not so obviously lead to another» is purported.

By way of conclusion: taken recklessly seriously, the exercise posited by the parallelisms of «May You Live in Interesting Times» proves a truly grateful one. I start to get a glimpse of Rugoff's definition of the ever slippery term «interesting» as ambivalent at least, or outright contradictionary at last. The art aligned with this comes janus-headed, finding itself in between worlds just like the true meaning of the Latin «inter-essere» as «being in between». The thought and research to invest in unpacking the vector's of such artistic practice rewards you with new discoveries within supposedly known work. And yet I shrug like Atlas in the face of the task to invest this amount of labor and love into only a single one of the surrounding works to my chosen one (even though this would certainly be interesting indeed). What remains are two new allies: Nairy Baghramian's «Maintainers» on my left and Nairy Baghramian's «Dwindlers» on my right shoulder. United, they defy the biennials' hard-boiled hagiographies, providing an exoskeleton not yet exterminated but always standing to lose. Just like that sinking city, it's shrinking stability – unless we lessen our grip, bring down the number of people (not pigeons) that fall into Venice in search of qualities and intensities unlike those of the reduced sizes of their lives and hopes; the degenerate cruisers. Or to once again quote the apt words of Marian Goodman Gallery: «Who said we might judge a society by its plumbing?»

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