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FALL PREVIEW

VENICE BIENNALE: FOUR VIEWS

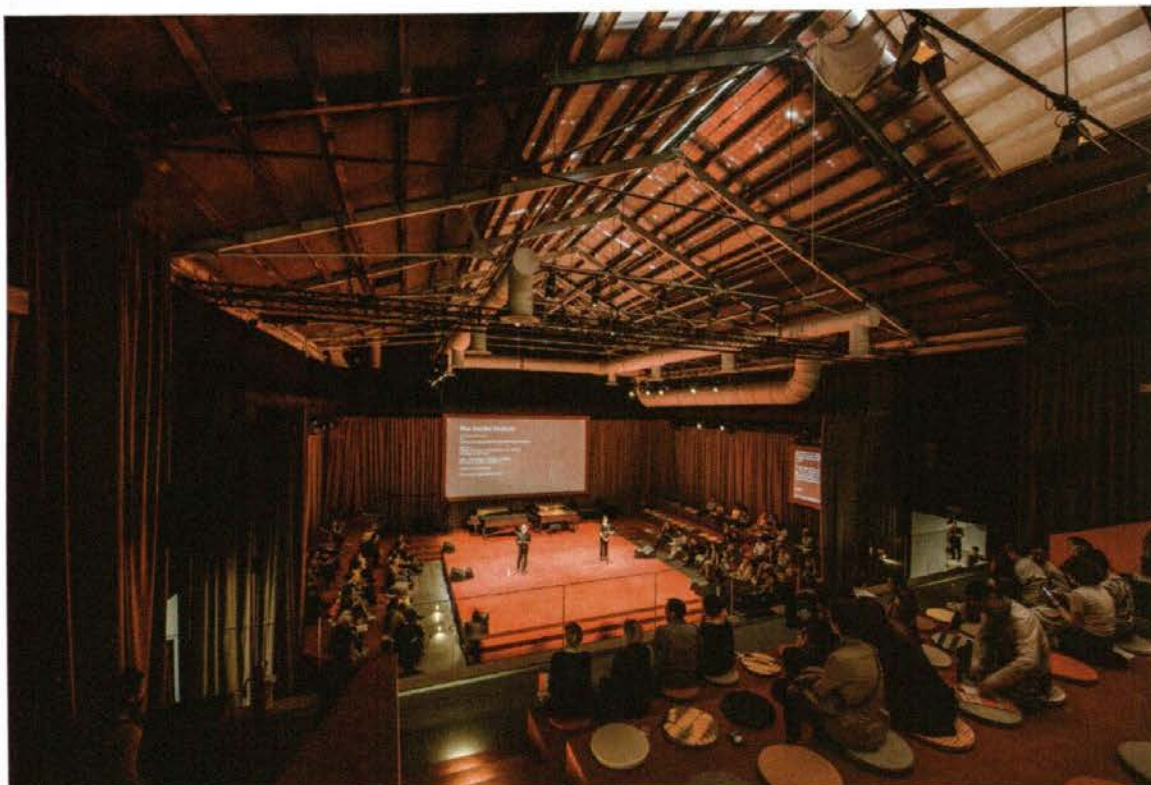
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TORBJØRN RØDLAND



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Previous page: Fabio Mauri, *Il Muro Occidentale o del Planto* (The Western Wall or the Wailing Wall) (detail), 1993, suitcases, bags, boxes, leather casings, fabric, wood, 13' 1 1/2" x 13' 1 1/2" x 1' 11 1/2". From "All the World's Futures."

Left: Isaac Julien in collaboration with Mark Nash, *Das Kapital Oratorio*, 2015. Performance view, Arena, Central Pavilion, Venice, May 8. Photo: Andrea Avezzi.

Opposite page: Olga Chernysheva, *Untitled (If the place for being)*, 2014, charcoal on paper, 23 3/4 x 33 1/4". From the series "Graphic Performatives," 2014–15. From "All the World's Futures."

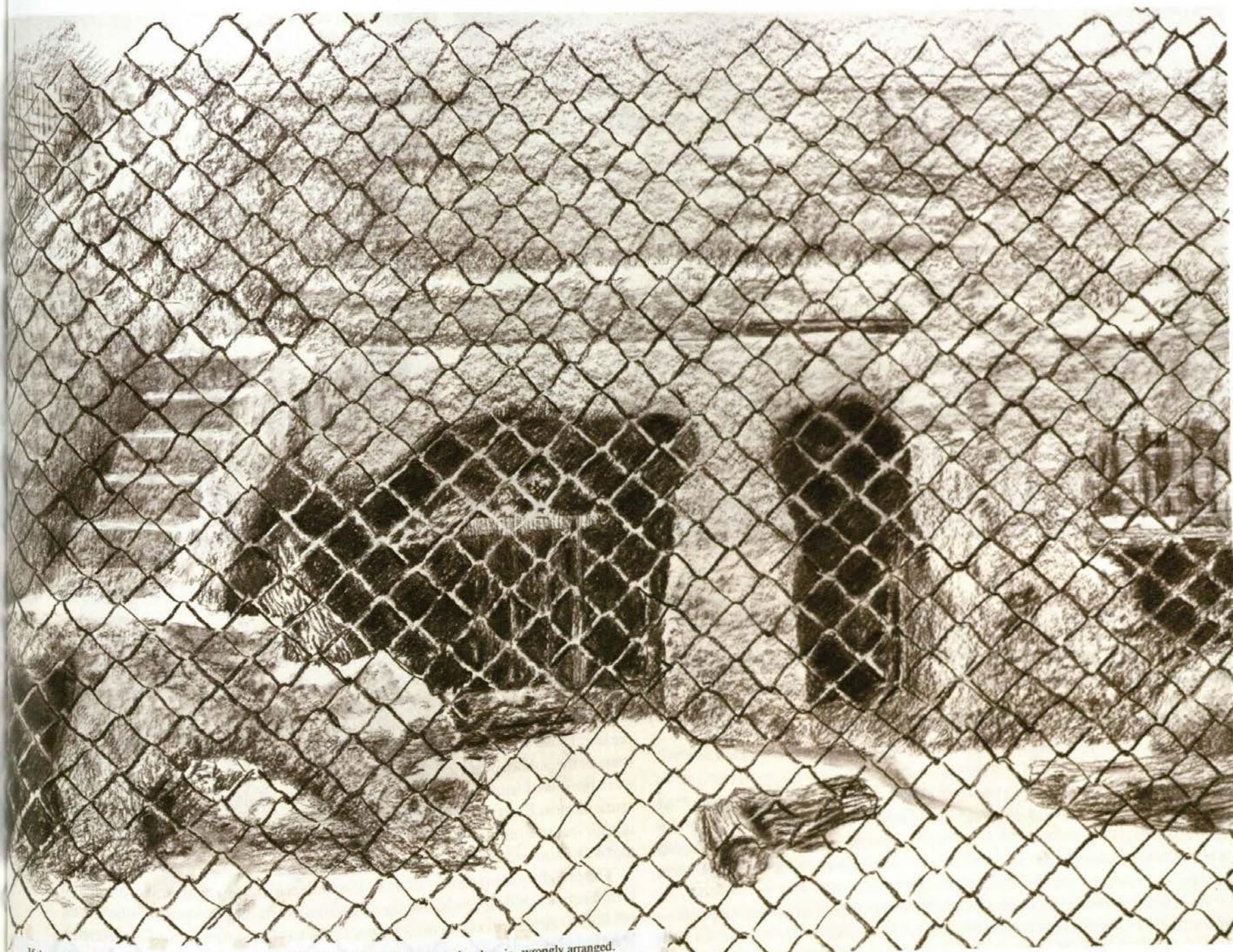
VENICE 2015

# Biennale on the Brink

BENJAMIN H. D. BUCHLOH

**THE EMBATTLED FORTRESS** and the sinking ship: These are the two predominant metaphors used to describe Europe's current situation—a predicament defined by the crisis of the Continent's former, or just possibly still operative, aspirations for political and economic union. What better place to confront the universal conditions of fracture and crisis that gave rise to these metaphors than Venice, where millions of global tourists are carefully shielded from the reality of the thousands of Middle Eastern refugees and African migrants washing up onto Italy's shores daily, dead or alive. When these heterogeneous figures meet in the streets of the City of Masks, they perform an eerie public, almost theatrical, fusion of the key dramatis personae of contemporaneity: African vendors hawking fake Gucci (the real Gucci vendor being the grandest Venetian Maecenas,

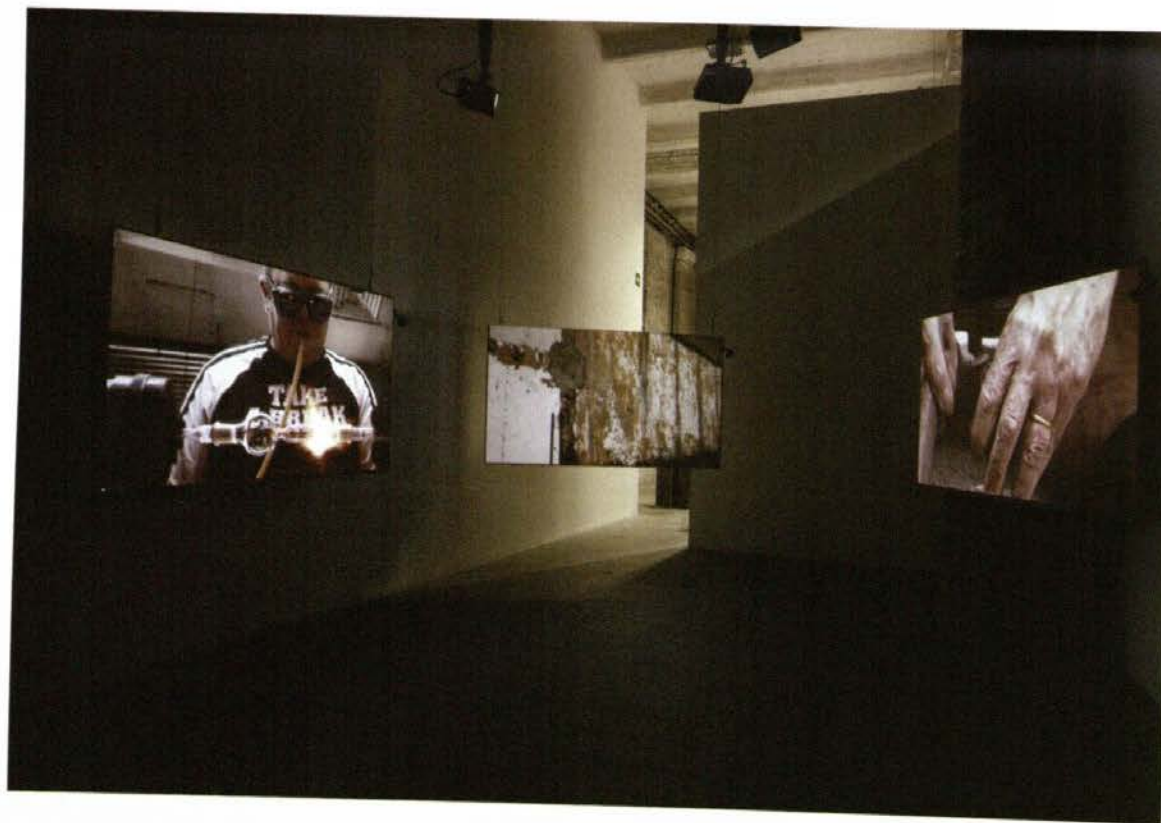
with his Punta della Dogana and Palazzo Grassi), haunted by bargaining Russian and Chinese clienteles and hunted by Italian police. Among the greatest of the crises faced by Europe—but certainly not by Europe alone—is the wholesale despoliation of the environment and consequent warming of the atmosphere, which has transformed the metaphor of the sinking ship into a quite literal figure, nowhere more alarmingly applicable than to the increasingly submerged isles of the Venetian lagoon. Under these circumstances, what could be a more difficult task than to curate an international biennial of art (in fact, Venice's fifty-sixth)—a task entrusted to the more-than-capable hands and mind of Okwui Enwezor, director of the Haus der Kunst in Munich and a veteran of the large international survey exhibition?



If the place is arranged so that the creature doesn't go there by itself, it means the place is wrongly arranged.

Card-carrying members of the international art-world party will likely walk away from this exhibition in deep disappointment, if not in total horror (witness the general feeling in New York, Berlin, and Frankfurt once the avant-garde of collectors, investors, and flippers had returned shortly after May Day). Indeed, "All the World's Futures" ignores most of the mercantile output plied at the hegemonic art fairs, an inventory liberatingly bypassed in service of Enwezor's primary curatorial concerns. For the exhibition's apparently alienating aesthetic (and critical) countermodels foreground in some rather subtle examples—and, occasionally, in utterly blunt statements—what most of us already knew: that the official industry of "the contemporary" (can one even still call it the culture industry?), especially its international stars of juvenile

painting, solely produces objects of desire for speculation with surplus capital. "All the World's Futures" counteracts these currently dominant forces by retrieving some of the models that defined artistic production at a not-too-distant historical moment when cultural practices still engendered institutional and post-colonial critiques, for example, or when they had affirmed forms of differently gendered and alternate socio- and geopolitical identities—confronting, if not furthering, the breakdown of patriarchal nation-state cultures under the impact of globalization and underscoring, while exacerbating, the decisive erosion of skilled artistic practices under the pressures of media technologies. But most of all, Enwezor's Biennale addresses the fundamental question of whether visual culture can continue to function productively once it has been excised from the



Left: Antje Ehmann and Harun Farocki, *Labour in a Single Shot*, 2011–14, five-channel video projection, color, sound, approx. 450 films, each 1–2 minutes. Installation view, Arsenale, Venice, 2015. Photo: Sara Sagui.

Right: Harun Farocki, *White Christmas*, 1968, 16 mm, black-and-white, sound, 3 minutes. Installation view, Arsenale, Venice, 2015. Photo: Alessandra Chemollo.

Far right: Alexander Kluge, *Nachrichten aus der ideologischen Antike: Marx—Eisenstein—Das Kapital* (News from Ideological Antiquity: Marx—Eisenstein—Capital), 2008–15, three-channel projection, color, sound, 360 minutes. Installation view, Central Pavilion, Venice, 2015. Photo: Kate Lacey.



Enwezor's selection of many relatively unknown artists from a broad range of historically marginalized zones provides us with ample opportunity to further decenter our reading of visual culture.

bourgeois/postbourgeois public sphere and its communicative structures and has become an isolated part of an altogether separate economic order. In light of these concerns, Enwezor's decision to stage daily readings of Karl Marx's *Kapital* (a project directed by Isaac Julien) as the very centerpiece of his exhibition must be seen as a perfectly plausible allegorical proposal.

A second subtext of Enwezor's Biennale is the impact of an ever-expanding and utterly controlling media apparatus. More precisely, "All the World's Futures" asks what role conventional artistic practices might still claim in a system of technologically mediated ideological and political control, a system of control so ubiquitous and efficient that even a radically recalibrated notion of publicness must necessarily be invalidated within it. The dilemma posed by this inescapable contradiction was almost too tellingly manifested in the national pavilions' persistent if implicit claim to represent the cultural production of a particular nation-state at this particular moment, despite its being increasingly evident that the idea of a coherent national culture—at least under the impact of total economic globalization and universal technological control—is no longer credible, even if it were desirable.

Such insights seem to have motivated Enwezor to install a few exemplary works from the recent, or even not so recent, past in an exhibition that is, by definition, programmatically geared toward parading the newest and the latest down the runways of the art and culture industries. Thus Enwezor's unexpected

inclusion of Marcel Broodthaers's *Jardin d'hiver* (Winter Garden), 1974, must be taken as more than a mere homage to the late Belgian artist, whose work long ago mourned the disappearance of public culture from the functions of the museum. Enwezor has rightly paid similar respects to the septuagenarian Hans Haacke by emphatically situating several of the artist's foundational pieces from the late 1960s and early '70s as central points of reference and reflection on the crisis of the public sphere in the present moment. (Tellingly, all of Haacke's works were borrowed from the artist's own collection, signaling the continuing reluctance of most European and American museums to embrace Haacke's work, if not for its utter radicality and brilliance, then at least to get on with the by now inevitable and necessary process of canonization.)

The Enlightenment project of analyzing and criticizing the disintegration and disappearance of the promises of the bourgeois/postbourgeois public sphere was, of course, one of the central undertakings of post-Frankfurt School philosophy. It found its first programmatic formulation in Jürgen Habermas's epochal text revised by Alexander Kluge and Oskar Negt ten years later, in their *Public Sphere and Experience*. And these two critical texts have informed not only Enwezor's conception of the exhibition but also a great number of the works in it—an influence evident not merely in the extensive screen time devoted to a work by Kluge himself (a three-channel projection of six hours of his 570-minute opus *Nachrichten aus der ideologischen Antike: Marx—Eisenstein—Das Kapital* [News from Ideological Antiquity: Marx—Eisenstein—Capital, 2008–15]) but also in the emphatic presentation of the films and videos of one of the most important cultural figures to have emerged from these debates in Germany, the late filmmaker and writer Harun Farocki.

Another striking contribution to this project of commemorating the functions of the now defunct postbourgeois public sphere—or of reconceiving and thereby resuscitating it—is Julien's staging of an ongoing public reading of all three



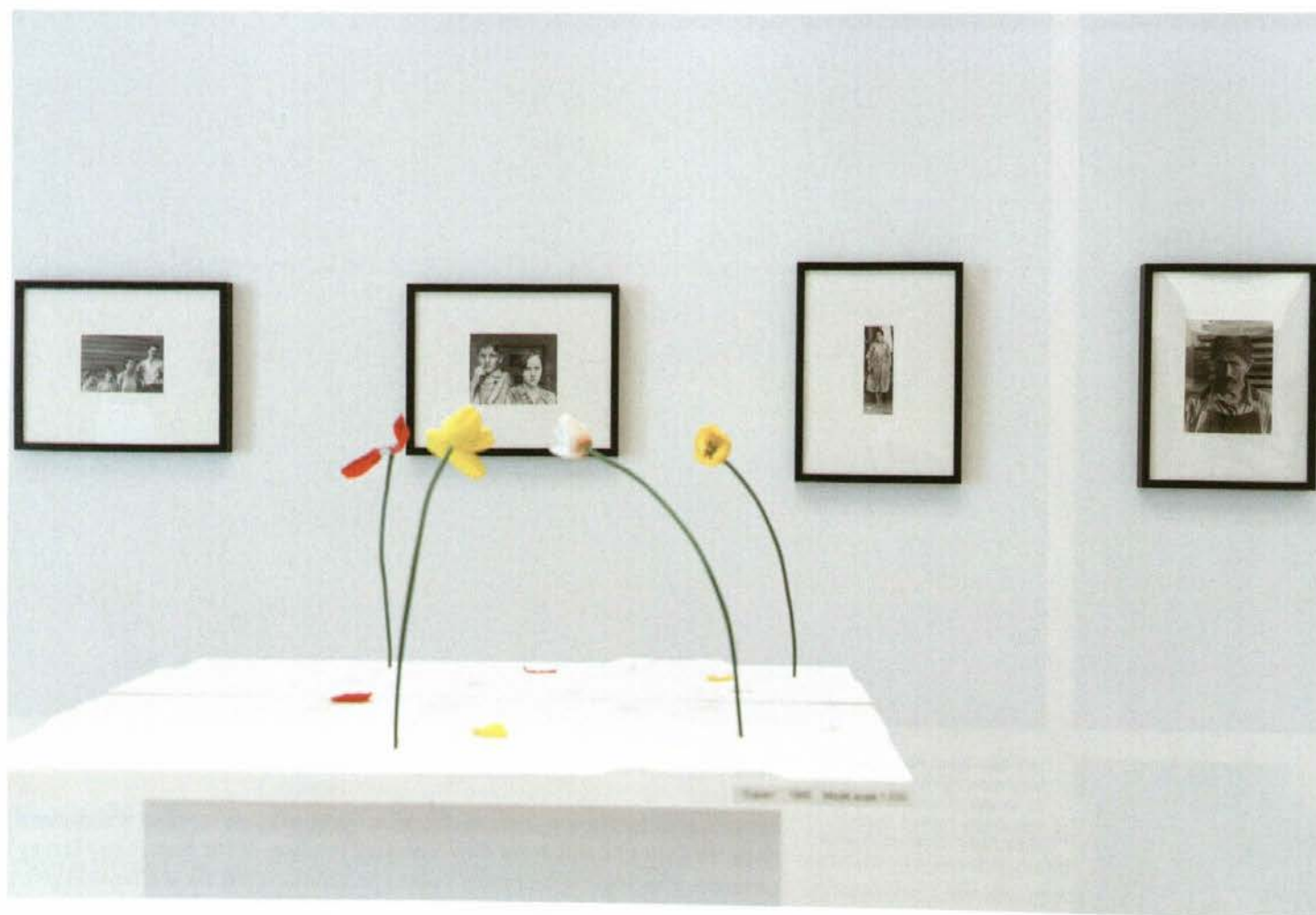
Left: Isaac Julien, *Kapital*, 2013, two-channel HD video, color, sound, 31 minutes 16 seconds. Installation view, Central Pavilion, Venice, 2015. Photo: Alessandra Chemollo.



volumes of *Das Kapital*, in a simulated agora space designed by the architect David Adjaye for the Biennale's extensive performance program. In a sense, Adjaye has created a symbolic counter-public sphere of the future, literally enacted in all of its splendid, perhaps slightly ironic, seductions. (Each of the seats carries a differently ornamented fabric, for instance, and the Arena, as it is called, is the largest unbroken space in the exhibition.) In tandem with the regular reading of one of the philosophical texts most relevant to the present moment, Adjaye's counter-public space offers not only an almost utopian respite from the actually existing public—the thousands of international tourists performing themselves on the streets of Venice with their selfie sticks—but a cure (if one is possible) for the painful affliction caused by the Museum of Modern Art's recent celebrations of performance as a publicly enforced cult of narcissism. In a second, equally striking work by Julien, the video *Kapital*, 2013, the artist is seen interviewing David Harvey, a leading authority on Marx, in front of an audience at London's Hayward Gallery in 2012. This conversation culminates in a sublime moment when, from the audience, the late Stuart Hall challenges Harvey's authoritativeness, if not his authoritarian truth claims, by insisting on the importance of race, gender, and

constructed identities in systems of production and consumption, which clearly requires a subtler and more differentiated reading of the text than Harvey's orthodox insistence on the primacy of the proletarian class allows. Beyond giving us a moving testament to Hall's radical and independent mind—this was probably one of his last recorded statements—Julien's public instruction in the intricacies of *Das Kapital* simultaneously delivers (inadvertently or not, but most likely in a sly and truly artistic fashion) an awareness of the precarious condition of staging philosophy as a performative operation. While his project could have been inspired by John Cage's marathon readings of James Joyce's *Finnegans Wake* on New Year's Eve in New York, the act of reading philosophy had not been previously conceived as an act of public performativity. Thus, in the present moment, the staging of *Das Kapital* inevitably spectacularizes the text while at the same time instructing and illuminating its listeners.

Another initially enigmatic but ultimately immensely productive reflection on the different historical stages of the waning of the public sphere is prompted by the confrontation between a complete set of images from Walker Evans's "Let Us Now Praise Famous Men" (1936) and a complete set of Isa Genzken's architectural models, produced for this exhibition, documenting her proposals for public sculpture (the majority of which remain unrealized, though some have been installed temporarily in public places and as part of exhibitions). Enwezor's strategy to confront the fundamentally different communicative regimes ordering these two projects must have resulted from the insight that the dialectics of public and private spaces, the imbalances between mass-cultural intrusion and subjective resistance, have developed at a rapid pace. After all, one of the distinguishing features of Evans's celebrated series was the manifest belief that photography still had a voice in recognizing and documenting the dramatic changes that had come about as the result of mass production, the mechanization of agriculture, and capital's cycles of boom and bust, and that subjective agency could still counter the rise of mass cultural control. By contrast, Genzken's propositions—



Above: Nidhal Chamekh, *The Anti-Clock Project* (detail), 2015, plastic, 3-D-printed resin, drawing, text, photograph, dimensions variable, model: 5 7/8 x 7 8/16 x 3 9/16". From "All the World's Futures."

Left: View of "All the World's Futures," 2015, Central Pavilion, Venice. Foreground: Isa Genzken, *Project for 'Tulpen'*, 1988. Background: Four works from Walker Evans's series "Let Us Now Praise Famous Men," 1936. Photo: Kate Lacey.

**The Biennale's performance space creates a symbolic counter-public sphere of the future, literally enacted in all of its splendid, perhaps slightly ironic, seductions.**

which typically entail the interjection of a grotesque, if not outright absurd, countermonumentality into the architectural remnants of a disintegrating public sphere—underscore the disappearance from built spaces of the very possibility of subjective self-determination and resistance, as a consequence of spectacle's totalitarian spatial and media controls. Generating historical insight into the specific structural and morphological differences between private spaces, forms of subjective resistance, and public control and domination over the past century, Enwezor's inspired juxtaposition produces a collision of *dispositifs* that makes this uncommon constellation all the more poignant and productive.

Enwezor's decision to foreground new voices from distinct geopolitical contexts—figures who inhabit different social subject positions and diverse political and economic structurings of public space—inevitably drew him to the numerous sites of former colonial domination in Africa and Southeast Asia. But it would also point to those places where current neocolonialisms—European, American, and now Chinese and Indian—have assembled the financial means, corporate laws, and authoritarian orders to reconstruct and continue colonialism, harnessing far more efficient and decisive means to exploit and oppress local populations,

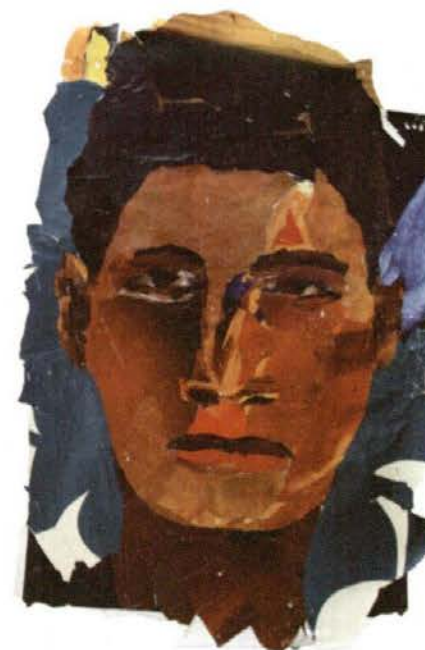
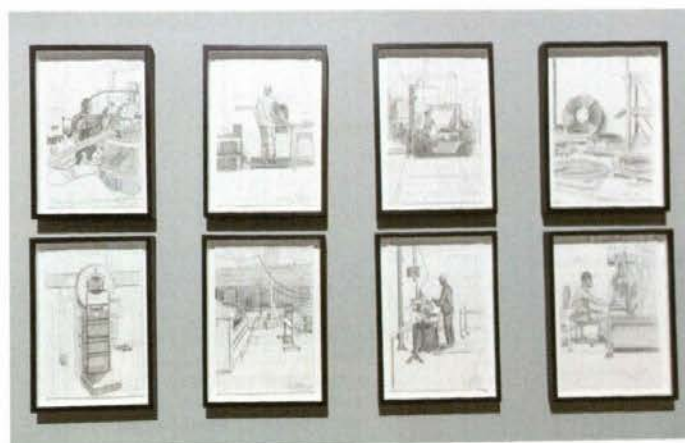
depriving them of their resources and bringing ecological ruin to their environments so that Western-style consumption can continue—at all costs for these populations and at little cost to the colonizers.

Enwezor's selection of many relatively unknown artists from a broad range of historically marginalized zones—from postcolonial Africa to the Middle East to postwar Vietnam—provides us with ample opportunity to further decenter our reading of visual culture and to rethink the determining differences of cultural production in each specific context (as opposed to illustrating a grandiloquent narrative about globalization's universally liberating impact on cultural production). In fact, the exhibition makes one wonder what productive after-effects participation in the Biennale might generate for these artists and their peers in countries such as Egypt, Algeria, Tunisia, Ghana, and Vietnam: Will their success simply be measured by their attainment of global visibility, or will their growing international exposure nourish locally specific political and cultural forms of communicative action and self-representation, to the benefit of social groups heretofore deprived of a platform for their cultural speech acts?

The Biennale's confrontation with a broad range of asynchronous practices drives home the lesson that the social functions and the status of an artistic producer cannot be judged by so-called universal—i.e., patriarchal and Eurocentric—aesthetic criteria any longer (if they ever could have been). To the contrary, within each geopolitical context, the perceptual and cognitive conditions controlling the public sphere ultimately determine the possible forms of artistic and cultural communication, be they residually available or emergent. Whether earlier forms



Clockwise, from right: Joachim Schönfeldt, *Factory Drawing Drawn In Situ (Alex 1-10)* (detail), 2010-15, ten graphite-on-paper drawings, each 16½ x 11 7/8". From "All the World's Futures." Kay Hassan, *Untitled*, 2015, paper construction, approx. 87 x 57". From "All the World's Futures." Massinissa Selmani, *Do we need shadows to remember #5*, 2014, graphite on paper, 15¼ x 19¼". From the series "Do we need shadows to remember?," 2013-15. From "All the World's Futures."



of public life and models of subjectivity remain viable, and whether advanced media culture has or has not yet completely compromised the credibility and viability of formerly valid artisanal or skill-based practices—as it has done in Western hegemonic cultures—depends entirely on the particularities of local structures of cultural production and currently operative principles of power.

## DRAWING AND (DIS)CONTENTS

From this perspective, the Biennale's presentation of numerous artists engaged in relatively traditional forms of drawing suspends us in a precarious critical reflection. Skilled draftsmanship compellingly put to the service of representing this locally specific sociopolitical narratives is almost everywhere apparent in this exhibition, most notably in the work of Teresa Burga (Peru, b. 1935), Nidhal Chamekh (Tunisia, b. 1985), Olga Chernysheva (Moscow, b. 1962), Tiffany Chung (Vietnam, b. 1969), Joachim Schönfeldt (South Africa, b. 1958), and Massinissa Selmani (Algeria, b. 1980). If artists have long been taught conventional draftsmanship in provincial art schools the world over, the drawing practices represented in the Biennale suddenly acquire a relative and particular interest in the international present of this exhibition—not only because they demarcate the historically and geopolitically distinct conditions within which their perception and artistic articulation have been institutionally and discursively trained, but also because they remind us to what extent the preponderant de-skilling of our artists, which seemed only the natural choice of autonomous free agents, is instead the inevitable result of historically and geographically over-

determined processes. The drawings on view in "All the World's Futures" thus also pose the question of whether, to what degree, and for how long the traditional skills employed in their making, while sustained in relative isolation, can continue to function productively within those particular geopolitical contexts before they, in turn, will be effaced by globalizing economic operations and technologies.

The South African artist Kay Hassan poses similar questions, not in relation to techniques of representation, but in terms of the traditions of genres, with an aim to refigure portraiture into an adequate tool of representation for an emerging postcolonial subjectivity. Rather than follow in the footsteps of the so-called Düsseldorf School of photographers, who took the portrait genre for granted as an eternally available category—when, in fact, it was valid only within the narrow boundaries of the photographers' own class and geopolitical limitations—Hassan ingeniously inverts the *décollage* technique (of all recent neo-avant-garde operations, the least likely to serve the purposes of portraiture) to produce an astonishing revision of the genre. By radically redefining the technique and the genre of depiction, Hassan has brought visibility to South African youths hitherto excluded from historical and political representation, who may now find a purpose in these images as initial representations of their proper agency.

Perhaps the most visually striking of these new drawing projects is the work of Chung, whose deceptively saccharine-colored, flowery ornaments reveal, on closer inspection, precise cartographic functions, whether tracing the migration of Syrian refugees across specific geographic and political boundaries, marking the endless agglomerations of fatal collisions between the needs of populations



Left: Tiffany Chung, *31 Days in the Capital of the Revolution*, 2014, ink and oil on vellum and paper, 31 x 39". From the series "Syria Project," 2014–. From "All the World's Futures."

Right: Danh Vo, *Ο Θεός μαυρο* (Black God), 2015, marble sarcophagus fragment, dyed silk. Installation view, Danish pavilion, Venice. From "mothertongue." Photo: Nick Ash.

Opposite page, from left: Vincent Meessen, *One.Two.Three.*, 2015, three-channel digital video, color, sound, 35 minutes. From "All the World's Futures." Melvin Edwards, *Maintain Control*, 1992, welded steel, 14 1/4 x 11 3/4 x 8 1/8". From "All the World's Futures."



and governmental and military controls, or concretely visualizing statistics about Syrian civil-war casualties or the number of children killed in the fighting by region ("Syria Project," 2014–). Within the historical typology of drawing, Chung's work might be situated between Constant's atopian schemes for *New Babylon*, 1956–74, which brilliantly deployed the seductions of utopian vision to actualize the imminent nightmares of contemporary urbanization, and the incisive drawing projects of the late Mark Lombardi (regrettably absent from this exhibition). Lombardi's projects collected the causes for the destruction of populations at the center of his investigations, tracing and demarcating the infinity of infestations between corporate capital and political power. Chung now charts the forced movements of victimized populations and refugees, and of economically driven migration, pressing the epistemes of cartography and the diagram into service of the most productive project drawing could currently attempt.

#### DÉCOR AND DOCUMENT

Another paradigmatic opposition to emerge from Enwezor's Biennale is that between artists seeking to redeem fragments of an irredeemable past (for example, by drawing on the power of myth and religion as allegorical citations illuminating structures of deep irrationality operative in the present) and those seeking to unearth and reactivate memories of traumatic historical events that

have been repressed, willfully ignored, overlooked, or forgotten. This dialectic is fully played out in two of the most successful, if programmatically opposite, pavilions—Denmark's "mothertongue," staged by artist Danh Vo (assisted by curators Marianne Torp and Tine Vindfeld), and Belgium's "*Personne et les autres*," staged by the artist Vincent Meessen (with curator Katerina Gregos). The first strategy, on full display in Vo's archaeological or melancholic décors (which owe much to Broodthaers, and perhaps more to Robert Rauschenberg's combine aesthetics of the 1950s), claims unmitigated access to fragments of memory and the registers of the unconscious where object montages can figure the deepest contradictions. Thus, Vo at times seems to invert (and turn back on us) the extreme cruelty of the colonialist gaze by shifting the original violence of the recent past to allegorical cuts devalorizing classical and Christian objects and images in the present. Literally intersecting fragments of these objects and images in acts of apparent vandalistic destruction, these allegorical fusions simultaneously mourn their fallen objects' lost promises of Eros and agape, long vanished from the contemporary world at large. Décor, which has emerged as one of the crucial artistic strategies of the present, appears to correspond to the inevitable spatialization of the collage and montage aesthetics that spectacle itself has enforced. At its best, it performs the treacherous high-wire act of formally acknowledging the inescapable condition of spectacular spatialization—without

Six stills from Steve McQueen's *Ashes*, 2014–15, two-channel video projected on a double-sided screen, 8 mm and 16 mm transferred to HD video, color, sound, 20 minutes 31 seconds. From "All the World's Futures."





Enwezor's inspired juxtaposition generates historical insight into the specific structural and morphological differences between private spaces, forms of subjective resistance, and public control and domination over the past century.

succumbing to its demands. But as is evident in the contributions of Adel Abdessemed, Katharina Grosse, and Oscar Murillo, for example, the mere accumulation of martial objects, menacing canvases, or mindless mounds of earth and pigment doesn't amount to much of anything if there's no trace of critical reflection on the principles that drove the work's expansive magnification.

By contrast, the documentarians simply claim that none of these paradoxes of plasticity matter any longer, if they should ever even have played a role in our perception and recordings of the sociopolitical and material world. Meessen's brilliant three-channel video installation *One. Two. Three.*, 2015, traces the historical dialogue between European critical theory (as represented by the writings of Belgian Situationist Raoul Vaneigem) and Congolese intellectuals and musicians (in particular, Joseph M'Belolo Ya M'Piku). That dialogue becomes the point of departure for a trenchant reflection on the intersection of Belgian colonial politics, the international—primarily American—conspiracy to prevent the Congo's liberation under the guidance of Patrice Lumumba, and the cultural rupture of 1968, within which the politics of the Situationist International played an important role in sustaining the forces of opposition against the Mobutu regime, which had been installed to further Western interests.

Other examples of opposition—if to less clearly defined powers of subjection—include Steve McQueen's profoundly moving two-channel video projection



*Ashes*, 2014–15, which narrates the life, or rather the death and burial, of a young friend of the artist's who was murdered by drug dealers he accidentally encountered on the island of Grenada, and Theaster Gates's allegorical work *Gone Are the Days of Shelter and Martyr*, 2014, an extraordinary video installation recorded in a deconsecrated and derelict Catholic church (now demolished) on Chicago's South Side. Showing two male figures—musicians affiliated with the Black Monks of Mississippi—who anticipate the final and inevitable destruction of a traditional space of congregation by beating a menacing rhythm with detached wooden doors that they periodically lift and let clamorously fall in the rubble-strewn echo chamber that once served the spiritual needs of the urban poor, the installation must also be seen as a crying-out in rage for the preservation of rapidly disappearing social spaces within which communities can be formed and sustained.

The exhibition itself operates along similar lines of attempted salvage and recuperation, recovering works that had long been ignored or known only within limited contexts of reception. Two examples, one American and one European, are particularly striking. The first is the rediscovery of the sculptural practice of Melvin Edwards. Obviously, his work has been known for quite some time, but it remained obscure outside the field of African American art until recently. Seeing Edwards's work anew in an exhibition context such as "All the World's Futures"





Left: Melvin Edwards, *Siempre Gilberto de la Nuez*, 1994, welded steel,  $13\frac{1}{2} \times 12\frac{1}{2} \times 7"$ . From "All the World's Futures."

Right: View of "All the World's Futures," 2015, Central Pavilion, Venice. Foreground, from left: Fabio Mauri, *Macchina per fissare acquerelli* (Machine to Fix Watercolors), 2007; Fabio Mauri, *Il Muro Occidentale o del Pianto* (The Western Wall or the Wailing Wall), 1993. Background, center: Fabio Mauri, *Fabio Mauri e Pier Paolo Pasolini alle prove di "Che cosa è il fascismo,"* 1971 (Fabio Mauri and Pier Paolo Pasolini at the Rehearsals of "What Is Fascism," 1971), 2005.



made shockingly perspicuous the egregious limitations of those definitions of modernist sculpture that excluded Edwards for so many years and deprived him of deserved recognition. The primary cause of this delayed reception cannot be explained merely by the work's referentiality—many great modernist sculptures have a distinctly referential dimension, including works by Brancusi and Giacometti; David Smith's "Medals for Dishonor," 1937–40, might well have served as a point of departure for Edwards's project. Yet what must have made his undertaking so unpalatable to modernists was its very specific historical referentiality: Edwards's inscription of physical will onto his resistant materials within the welding process itself conjures and formally manifests the memory of the sadistic infliction of pain on the resistant body laboring under the conditions of slavery. That insight into modernist proscriptions might also suggest that we revisit the aesthetic principles that insisted on a performative dimension of non-referential acts of material and procedural self-reflexivity (best and most heroically embodied, of course, in the work of Richard Serra, Edwards's exact contemporary). Or one might even compare two inherent types of referentiality in sculpture beyond Serra's performative materialism, as in the work of Edwards and John Chamberlain, and wonder, in retrospect, why the former's sculptural references

to the enslaved body in pain should appear any less appealing or convincing as a sculptural pretext than Chamberlain's sculptural evocations of the materiality of American car culture in the '60s. Edwards's sculptural work would thus seem to insist that symbolic accounts of the processes of labor and manual production will forever, at least in American culture, also have to mnemonically include the long-repressed referential horizon of industrial labor as slavery.

Enwezor has also initiated the recuperation of an almost unknown European figure from the recent past, the Italian artist, writer, and theoretician Fabio Mauri, a longtime friend and collaborator of Pier Paolo Pasolini. While apparently well known in certain circles in Italy, as is Edwards in certain circles in the United States, Mauri has remained completely illegible if not invisible to broader European, let alone American, audiences. Indeed, none of the large-scale exhibitions of Italian art of the '60s, which inevitably focused on Arte Povera, included Mauri. Once again, one must ask whether it was not the work's decisive if extremely subtle political and historical referentiality (a perpetual reflection on the Holocaust and its impact on Italian Jewish identity) that ensured Mauri's exclusion from Arte Povera's similarly unprepossessing but more abstractly engaged materialities. His emphatic invocation of the Italian (and Latin) word

*fine* or the English phrase *the end* in sheer, endless variations of script and ornament, on paper and other supports, including a giant antique movable construction ladder (*Macchina per fissare acquerelli* [Machine to Fix Watercolors], 2007), clearly went beyond the typical preoccupation with the end of art that haunted the 1950s and '60s. Rather, just as Georges Bataille insisted that after 1945 culture could no longer be conceived outside the parameters established by Auschwitz, Mauri seems to have insistently borrowed the first term of the infamous notion of the "final solution" as his point of departure for all future reflections on artistic production in general and, in particular, on the formation of subjects and of cultural and national identity in the second half of the twentieth century.

Thus the opposition between *décors* of recuperation and salvage and the paradigm of documentation appears to have become one of the central challenges

of the present: If the former—at times desperately, at times grotesquely—attempts to sustain mnemonic forms and melancholic contemplative spaces under the pressure of their imminent and final erasure by spectacle, the latter insists on and delivers actual information about repressed history and forgotten politics in the present. These two strategies of resistance are needed more urgently than ever to resituate cultural practices outside the hegemonies of the market and the institutions—and instead within the spheres of self-determining subjects contributing to the political articulation of their own historical needs and cultural desires now. □

*The 56th Venice Biennale is on view through Nov. 22.*

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Visit [Artforum's archive at Artforum.com](http://Artforum.com) for past coverage of the Venice Biennale.

Fabio Mauri, *Scherma fine* (Screen End), 1965, mixed media on paper, 20 1/2 x 27 1/2". From "All the World's Futures."

