

Biennale Arte 2017

VIVA ARTE VIVA

Curated by Christine Macel



57. Esposizione
Internazionale
d'Arte

The Exhibition: Focus on Art and Artists

Today, in a world full of conflicts and shocks, art bears witness to the most precious part of what makes us human. Art is the ultimate ground for reflection, individual expression, freedom, and for fundamental questions. Art is the favourite realm for dreams and utopias, a catalyst for human connections that roots us both to nature and the cosmos, that elevates us to a spiritual dimension. Art is the last bastion, a garden to cultivate above and beyond trends and personal interests. It stands as an unequivocal alternative to individualism and indifference. It builds us up and edifies us. At a time of global disorder, art embraces life, even if doubt ensues inevitably. The role, the voice and the responsibility of the artist are more crucial than ever before within the framework of contemporary debates. It is in and through these individual initiatives that the world of tomorrow takes shape, which though surely uncertain, is often best intuited by artists than others.

Viva Arte Viva is an exclamation, a passionate outcry for art and the state of the artist. *Viva Arte Viva* is a Biennale designed with artists, by artists and for artists, about the forms they propose, the questions they ask, the practices they develop and the ways of life they choose.

Rather than broaching a single theme, *Viva Arte Viva* offers a route that moulds the artists' works and a context that favours access and understanding, generating connections, resonances and thoughts. The journey unfolds over the course of **nine chapters**, or families of artists, beginning with two introductory realms in the Central Pavilion, followed by another seven across the Arsenale through the Giardino delle Vergini. Each chapter represents a Pavilion in itself, or rather a *Trans-Pavilion* as it is trans-national by nature but echoes the Biennale's historical organisation into pavilions, the number of which has never ceased to grow since the end of the 1990s. This semantic nod addresses the often debated relevance of the national pavilions, whilst going beyond it, as each chapter mixes artists of all generations and origins. There is however, no physical separation between the various pavilions, which flow together like the chapters of a book. From the *Pavilion of Artists and Books* to the *Pavilion of Time and Infinity*, these nine episodes tell a story that is often discursive and at times paradoxical, with detours that mirror the world's complexities, a multiplicity of approaches and a wide variety of practices. The Exhibition is intended as an experience, an extrovert movement from the self to the other, towards a common space beyond the defined dimensions, and onwards to the idea of a potential neo-humanism. This movement of the self towards the unknown, where experience and speculation are at the forefront, is in and of itself a response to a conservative environment, defying bias, distrust and indifference.

Viva Arte Viva also seeks to convey a positive and prospective energy, which whilst focusing on young artists, rediscovers those passed away too soon or those who are still largely unknown despite the importance of their work. These discoveries and recoveries give way, in each pavilion, to a communion of artists from several generations, offering perspectives on questions that were often broached as early as the 1960s and specially the 1970s. These issues are revisited by artists in

today's world of constant anthropological and societal change. The artists' interpretations hinge on forms that reflect the concerns of the civil society. After all, art may not have changed the world, but it remains the field where it can be reinvented.

Starting with the *Pavilion of Artists and Books*, the Exhibition reveals its premise, a dialectic that involves the whole of contemporary society, beyond the artist himself, and addresses the organisation of society and its values. Art and artists are at the heart of the exhibition, which begins by examining their practices, the way they create art, halfway between idleness and action, *otium* and *negotium*. The Roman *otium*, and its Greek predecessor *scholè*, originally understood as a privileged moment, is nowadays improperly translated as *idleness* of pejorative connotation, or *leisure*, which is not far removed from *entertainment*. The word *otium*, in contrast with the business world or *negotium*, from which the artist can never really escape, implies a space for free time, for inactivity and availability, a space of productive idleness and mind work, of quietness and action, a space where the work of art comes to be.

The decision to become an artist, in and of itself, requires taking a stance in society, one that is today broadly popular and widely acknowledged, but is perceived nevertheless as an act of calling into question work -and its by-product: money- as the absolute value in the modern world. Being an artist means differentiating between the private individual and the public individual, not as a person of media but as someone who is confronted with the *res publica*. Indeed, while the artist produces artworks that are meant to be commercialized, the modes of production of his or her disposal include an alternative within which the need for inactivity or rather non-productive action, for mind wandering and research, remain paramount. This position inevitably has consequences on the way in which free time is perceived by society: it is no longer a time to be spent or even consumed, but a time for oneself.

The Nine Trans-Pavilions:

The Pavilion of Artists and Books opens on a tension between action and inaction, between laziness and active engagement. This section of the exhibition looks at ways of being an artist, the reasons, both good and bad for "making art" today, looking also – with a hint of sarcasm – at the art *milieu* itself. This pavilion gives us a glimpse of the artists' studios; some of which increasingly resemble offices, warehouses or collective workplaces. Studios are no longer only places for introspective and solitary research. Some have become full-scale laboratories that congregate multiple skills and a particular hierarchy. No longer "factories" but rather workshops built around a communal life with shared qualifications and a horizontal, interconnected organisation, the doors of the studios are in fact wide open onto the public sphere.

The material and spiritual worlds of artists are unfolded in this pavilion, in particular through their relationship with books, texts and knowledge in its broadest sense, which is a recurrent theme in several artists' works. In an era described as post-internet, the relationship between artists and the written word does not appear to have relaxed, but rather it has been enriched with new meanings. The ambivalence of the artist in regards to the written word and especially to meaning, forecasts a deep transformation in terms of language, knowledge, the means to access knowledge and its place in society. Meanwhile, the artist continues to define himself in relation to the history of art, just as he has always done.

After this Pavilion, the Exhibition develops organically in a series of pavilions, rooms or *stanze*, inviting visitors into an experiential journey from interiority to infinity.

The Pavilion of Joys and Fears explores the relationship between the individual and his own existence, his emotions and feelings or the ones he tries to generate. In a world shaken by conflicts, wars, and increasing inequality that lead to populism and anti-elitism, subjective emotions resurface, now more than ever. This forces us to reconsider the human being, not only as a reasonable being capable of building a new, free and fraternal world, but also how he grapples with his impulses and emotions, including the less noble ones of fear, anxiety or aggression. A vulnerable and fragile self comes to light. New feelings of alienation due to forced migrations or mass surveillance, feelings of oblivion, distortion, and suspension gain momentum. At the same time, several artists think of the individual in its most private dimension, delving into their own relationships with their close ones or their ties to their country of origin. Some artists resort for instance to science fiction and cartoon-like imagery to address such feelings of melancholy and alienation. They reappropriate the self, its body and emotions, as the too-often forgotten source and the home for our thoughts. The reinvention of humanism is thus grounded on reason and, far from being isolated, it is connected to the reality of emotions.

Next on our journey, *The Pavilion of the Common* greets us in the Arsenale around the work of artists exploring the notion of the common world and the way to build a community, as a way to counter individualism and self-interests, which represent a worrisome threat in today's troubling climate. This topic was particularly vibrant in the history of contemporary art from the late 1960's through the 1970's, and remains just as relevant to this day, although tarnished by the failings and disillusion of such utopian dreams. The anthropological aspect is particularly important here, with a number of historical works addressing the issue of the common world where conceptions of the world appear the most different, or rooted to the earth and community as common denominators, regardless of ideology. Several artists have even embraced the participatory approach as a recurrent modus operandi that they implement with varying scales.

Other more ambivalent works regret the loss of the common and express their longing, although sometimes with the feeling of having reached a dead end. How do you build something in common in a world that has failed to realize all its projects of equality and fraternity, other than by attempting to recreate, here and there, at the micropolitical level, conditions for new possibilities?

Likewise, *The Pavilion of the Earth* is centred on environmental, animal and planetary utopias, observations and dreams. From communitarian utopias reminiscent of the ecological or esoteric ideas typical of the 1970s, to current theories about the ties between climate and capitalist strategies, as well as individual fictions; all conjure both a sense of melancholy and a profound joy. Some utopias go back to the beginnings of ecology, and interpret the work of art within an extended scope that reaches through the environment and life itself. With a systematic rejection of the world of individualist and sedentary progress, some artists continue to act on the fringes of the art system, while others narrate the turmoil of their environment. Issues of energy conversion and industrial transformation, and the exploitation of our planet's resources, are analysed through a historical prism, particularly as it relates to colonial history, and pervade the works of many artists, combining nostalgia and a sense of a future unknown.

The Pavilion of Traditions

Traditions that were once rejected in the 18th century by the Enlightenment and later by secular modernity, have re-emerged in the worst sense, namely fundamentalism and conservatism, sparking rejection and nostalgia for the past believed to be better. However and in spite of the many hesitations experienced as part of modernity and its faith in the project of a new man, the past thirty years have provided the opportunity, in the field of art, to question tradition no longer from the point of view of customs and behaviours, often associated with religion or morality, but

through the lens of dialogue between the old and the recent. The last few years have seen a plethora of artists explore not only contemporary or recent history, but also a more distant past, as if fired by the fever of archaeology, excavation, re-interpretation and reinvention. A sign of unstable times, tainted by a feeling of a by-gone era that must open up to new values, art delves into long past historical references in an urge for legitimacy, rebirth and reinvention.

In the *Pavilion of Shamans*, many artists subscribe to the definition of the artist as a “shaman”, and there are also those who become “missionaries”, as per Duchamps’s definition, stirred by an internal vision. This figure, which Joseph Beuys made his own, from which few managed to recover, and was mostly -in retrospect- underestimated, takes on a new dimension today, at a time where the need for care and spirituality is greater than ever. This spiritual turning point, characterized by the concern for others and meditation, appeals sometimes to various philosophies, in particular Buddhism or Sufism. Other artists seek to exorcise and purify in a post-colonial context, banishing exploitation and slavery *a posteriori*. The invention of stories or performances reminiscent of therapeutic rituals illustrates the aspiration towards the sacred, admittedly a key feature of the beginning of the 21st century, although without any religious digression. The artistic and political contribution attempts to transcend the ruins of the past and the wounds of the present, in a tone that is not exempt of playfulness, sometimes material, at others ironic.

The Dionysian Pavilion celebrates the female body and its sexuality, life and pleasure, all with joy and a sense of humour, and features numerous works created by female artists. Drawings, costumes, geometrical paintings with erotic lines, organic sculptures and photographs reinvent the image of the female body, no longer seen through the gaze of desire but from within or from its edges. The Pavilion is a hymn to sensuality and inebriation, combined with music, dance, singing, and trance as ways to access this dimension, where new states of consciousness seem possible.

The Pavilion of Colours

According to well-known neuroscientific studies, colours do not exist in themselves but are the result of a cognitive function performed by the human brain and eyes as they decipher reality. Colours thus appear to be a particularly subjective source of emotion, which calls to reconsider the relevance of the phenomenological approaches of art. With a fine balance between finesse and transparency, light and spirituality, haptic experience and visual explosion, loaded sometimes with anthropological, even political, connotations, The Pavilion of Colours can be described as the “fireworks” at the end of the journey through the Arsenale, where all the questions presented in the preceding pavilions come together to provide what might be described almost as an “out-of-self” experience prior to the final chapter.

The Pavilion of Time and Infinity

What form would a metaphysical approach to art take? Time as a flow of continuous mutations and impermanence that eventually lead to death, has inhabited the work of artists since the 1970s, when conceptual performance combined thoughts on the length of time and the inevitable fall. Reformulated by artists since the 1990s at the time of “presentism”, or suspended time and “hyper-instantaneity”, the notion of time re-emerges today with a new metaphysical quality, within Borgesian mazes and speculations of a future that is already embedded in the present, or in an ideal infinity. In face of the lagoon, the artist disappears or reinvents himself as “improved”, through the power of hypnosis.

Parallel events

Parallel projects and events follow the same curatorial premise, which is to place artists at the heart of the exhibition *Viva Arte Viva*. The **catalogue** is exclusively dedicated to the artists who are invited to present visual and textual documentation about their practice and their environment.

Artists are the guiding force behind *Viva Arte Viva* in more ways than one. In addition to their participation in the exhibition, they are also given the opportunity to be heard. Every Friday and Saturday during the six months of the exhibition, artists will host an *Tavola Aperta (Open Table)* and meet visitors over a casual lunch to hold a lively conversation about their practice. These biweekly events will be organized in two dedicated spaces refurbished for this purpose in front of the Central Pavilion of the Giardini and in the Sala d'Armi in the Arsenale.

The *Tavola Aperta (Open Table)* events will be filmed and streamed live on La Biennale's website.

A permanent space has also been created in both Exhibition venues for the *Artists' Practices Project*, a series of short videos made by the artists about themselves and their way of working. In the weeks preceding the vernissage of *Viva Arte Viva*, a new video premiered every day and is now available in La Biennale's website, giving the public the opportunity to become familiar with the participating artists.

These two parallel projects are open to all artists in the Biennale. The artists representing the National Pavilions are welcome to host their own *Tavola Aperta (Open Table)* event on Wednesdays and Thursdays. They are also invited to join the *Artists' Practices Project* with their videos. *Viva Arte Viva* thus hopes to reinforce and build on the unity of the Biennale around the artists themselves.

Finally, the project titled *Unpacking My Library*, inspired by Walter Benjamin's essay published in 1931, allows the artists of *Viva Arte Viva* to compile a list of their favourite books. This is both a way to get to know the artists better and a source of inspiration for the public (Walter Benjamin - *Unpacking My Library: a Talk about Book Collecting*, followed by a list of the texts read and collected by the author). The list of books can be found both in the Exhibition at the Central Pavilion and in the catalogue. The books listed by all the participating artists are available to visitors at the Stirling Pavilion in the Giardini.

Special projects and performances

Several special, site-specific and performance projects have been commissioned especially for the Giardini, the Giardino delle Vergini and other venues around the city of Venice. The opening week features a dense programme of approximately twenty performances, which are live-streamed and made available in La Biennale's website. The videos are also on view in a dedicated room of the Arsenale, the *Performance Room* (Sale d'Armi G).

Christine Macel, *curator of Biennale Arte 2017*