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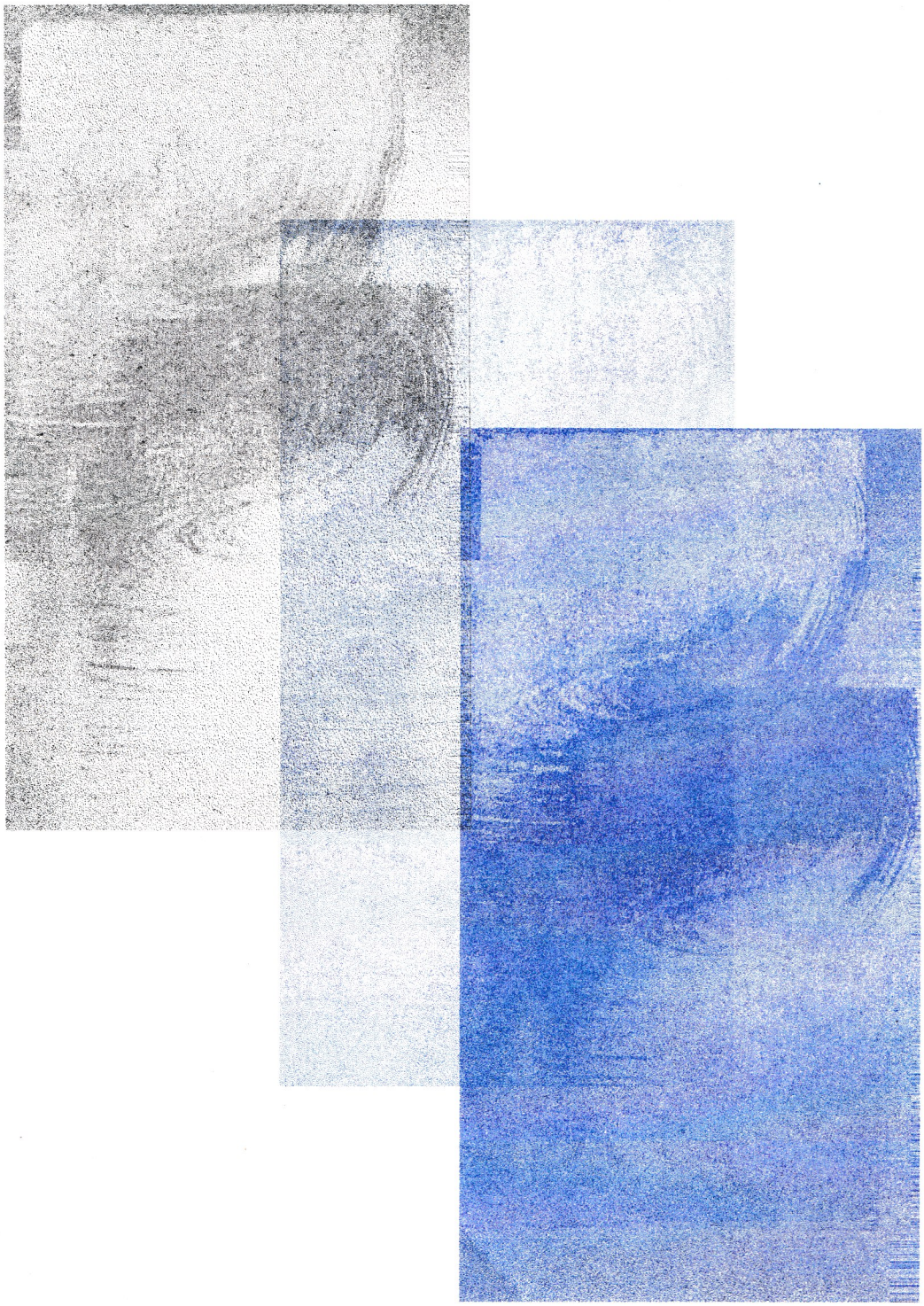
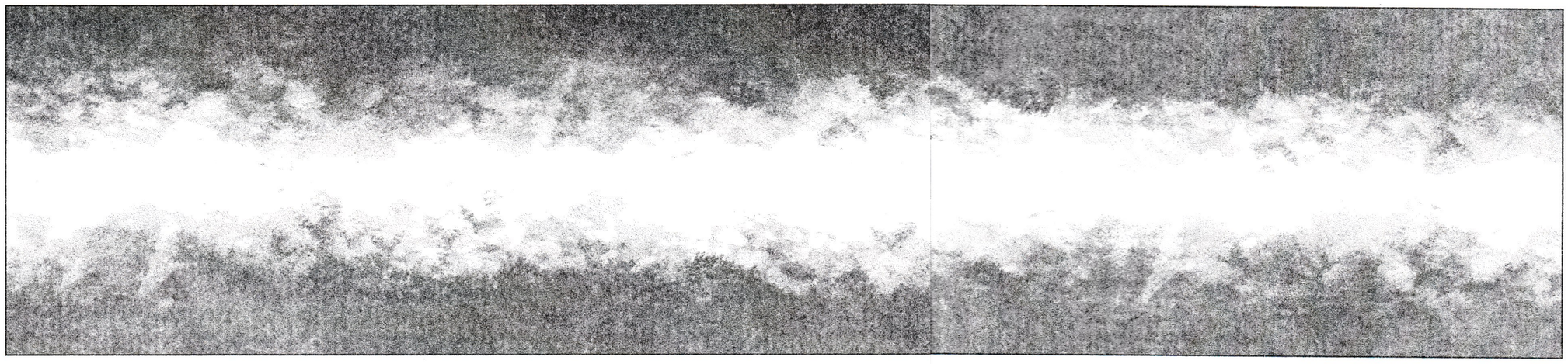


Precarity



Editorial Note

Precarity in this context refers to the instability of human and non-human life under the conditions of capitalism. Many recent readings of precarity come from a Marxist analysis of contemporary labor conditions in neoliberal economies—temporary contracts, low hourly or piece-meal wages, non-union jobs. But as the threat of capitalism to the planetary existence became apparent, the notion of precarity has been extended by such theorists as Donna Haraway, Lauren Berlant, and Anna Tsing beyond working conditions to encompass the landscape and non-human entities—such as bodies of water or animals—as sharing in the de-stabilized conditions of life under a capitalist mode of production. Speaking of precarity can thus be seen as speaking of a shared condition across the diverse human and non-human beings and environs that make up a broader struggle for life. This instability of existence resonates throughout the texts in this issue from the daily reproduction of life for artists and cultural workers, to the racialized domestic space. The question is then not only how to mitigate these threats to life, but also how to embrace the political and trans-human possibilities that comes from a mutual struggle within these shared conditions.

Jason Waite

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Homes in Precarity and Precarity in Homes: A New Consideration of Non-Western Domestic Spaces

Harmanpreet Randhawa

Rosemary George in *Homes in Empire, Empire in Homes* proposes that "management of the empire [in colonial discourse] (is) represented as essentially home-management on large". She describes how similar to the management of a home to sustain the empire "there are doors to kept locked, corners to be dusted, rooms to be fumigated and made free of pests, children (i.e "natives") to be…disciplined, boundaries to be drawn and fences mended". This notion of viewing the home (or the ethnic home in this case) as a fertile ground for colonial disciplinary practices and "away" (usually the West) the otherwise is a well-debated subject by cultural theorists, radical thinkers, and artists alike. My interest in this subject, however, lies in the investigation of the transgressive instances within the "disciplined" home that certain cultural and homosocial practices/ habits accommodate- instances that defy the western teleological narratives about the ethnic homes being "backwards" and call for newer interpretive practices more specific to the non-western subjects.

Till the age of 13, I danced with my sister in our living room. We would move the dark wood coffee table to the side, take our slippers off and tune into the latest Bollywood songs channels ready to rehearse the dance sequences in the "item songs"[1] from Bollywood movies. Despite the presence of the chairs, curtains, sofas, and the TV set we managed to transform the homely space of the living room into a dance studio, a stage, a ground where young boys can roleplay as the eroticised female dancers in the music videos and be the Sheila, Munni, or Chikni Chameli. At that time, I was unaware of the transformative nature of such an act. A "children's" play that allowed us to adapt the space of the Indian and allegedly heterosexual "home" facilitating acts of gender deviancy to take place in its perimeters defined by tradition and culture. Whilst I do understand that our youth played a big role in me being able to dance to certain songs, at the same time I believe ethnic homes behold queerness not in the "otherness" sense, but rather in a more normalised playful manner that has nothing to do with the Western notions of categorisation and visibility.

Gayatri Gopinath examines exactly such instances of social and gender deviancy that exclusively exist in the gendered and racialised space of the ethnic home. Her reading of the homosocial relationships that the ethnic homes accommodate between fathers and sons, mothers, and daughters, between sisters-in-law in films such as *Fire* (1999), *Bend it Like Beckham* and the Novel *Funny Boy* (1994), to name a few, provides us with an approach more specific to non-western household arrangements and relationships, parting ways from the logics of "categorisation and enumeration" (Gopinath 2005). Throughout her book *Impossible Desires*, she makes it clear that to seek evidence of homosexual formations in cultures not western, one must not seek for explicit depictions of gay or lesbian behaviours but rather for instances that sustain such non-heterosexual identities without the necessity of their public revelation as such.

This methodology of analysing public cultures, which she calls the "Queer diasporic viewing practice" does not only allow us to reinterpret the depictions of ethnic homes in art and literature but it also offers the subjects considered – ethnic people and ethnic people belonging to a diaspora- a possible means to reinterpret their traumatic pasts or presents as they piece together their fragmented realities.

Returning to Rosemary George, I believe that in order to perform such viewing practice one must seek for ajar doors, undusted corners, undisciplined children, unfumigated rooms and so on to navigate "difference" in landscapes already different to our Euro-American spheres. It is a matter of approaching critique of such spaces in both art and literature with precarity and staying with it throughout our engagement with the subject matters; only then we can rethink the walls of the ethnic home not as captivating mediums of patriarchy but rather as a sign of practising "one's right to opacity" (Glissant, 2010). The inclusive female or male spaces in South Asia as not only the markers of oppressive gender segregation but also spaces where homosocial instances can be permitted without being questioned as such. The dressing table, the kitchen, and the living room as not just areas where the women of the house should be banished to, but also places where young boys can experiment with their means of expression under the adoration of their mothers and sisters.

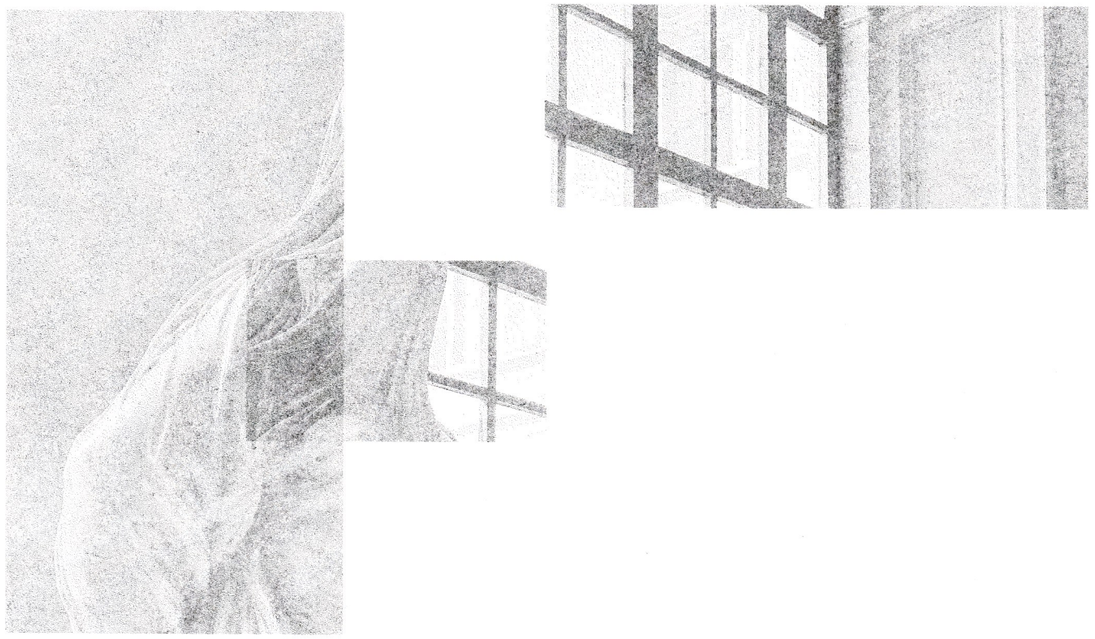
Harmanpreet Randhawa is a second-year Fine Art student at Ruskin School of Art & St. Catherine's College

[1] The classic meaning of item number(song) refers to highly sensualized songs with racy imagery and suggestive lyrics. (Towheed Feroze, 29 September 2014).

You

Kelly Lloyd

I need to get a hold of the checklist of questions that the dude asked me when I applied to be a sole trader in the UK. It was like,
"Who pays people you employ?"
"I do."
"Is there anyone else who handles payments?"
"No."
"Who does the marketing for your business?"
"I do."
"Is there anyone else who handles marketing for your business?"
"No."
"Who produces products and services for your business?"
"I do."
"Is there anyone else who helps you produce products and services for your
business?"
"No."
"If you were unable to do this work, would there be someone who could do this
work for you?"
"No."



You get the idea. It was a sobering moment. When I walked out of that office, I realized how alone I was. Was there anyone to help me? Of course! I've gotten so much help to get to where I am today, so much help. But if I got sick, was there anyone to help me continue my business? No. Was there anyone who I could call to deliver that workshop or teach that class or install that exhibition or edit that podcast? Maybe… if the institutions I work for have the capacity and funding… otherwise, no.

At the end of the day, I'm the only one steering my ship. If I let go of my wheel, it's going down. I can definitely let go of my wheel sometimes. The pandemic has significantly slowed the pace of my career in ways that are worrying but better for my mental and physical health… But, if I step away for too long, it's going down. There is no one who will step in and save my ship, and I have to proceed forward knowing that.

I'm thinking about two moments in my interviews with Gregory Bae and Leah Capaldi. When speaking about the importance of a network, and the importance of finding people who "allow you opportunities… [and] help you to sustain and to keep living as an artist"[1], Greg also noted that,

'… there is a certain amount of like your own, like, volition, your own kind of ambition that you have to carry, but you know, you need to be able to find support, and a network or something that's going to help you achieve these things. And if you don't have that network, then you're going to have a much more difficult life, frankly.'

And while I was talking to Leah and we were talking about how "space is so important for artists"[2], she said,

'I've always thought that it's like an alchemy, like making artwork is almost like (it sounds so romantic and daft to say this) but it's, it's almost like mystical. You make this show, you have this practice, and it's all held together by you. Like you're the glue that puts these materials and ideas together to create a piece of work. And it's, it's hard. It's really hard to do that. And to do that well. And to do that in an interesting way.'
We are the glue that holds our materials and ideas and shows and practice together. We do that alone, and while it is important to have a community, like Greg said, "there is a certain amount of your own… volition, your own kind of ambition that you have to carry".

I had spoken to Merve Ünsal about how she updates her will regularly before I interviewed her, and so when we spoke, I asked her to talk about it again. She said that:

'… it's a way of empowering myself, because I think one of the things that like, happens in the art world or art ecosystem or the world, whatever you want to call it, is that, you know, people only get to make demands when they're successful, or they're when they're in positions of power, right? So, as an emerging artist, you show wherever they want you to show up, or you go wherever. And so there's this lack of choice. And then there's like, the sweet moments in there at some point when like, you get to have agency. And the reason I write my will and publish it and think about it all the time, and I talk about it all the time, also in public sitations, is that I have the ability to make those decisions all the time. And I think about these things all the time. The fact that I don't get to maybe exert it, or like the fact that I don't get to act it out doesn't mean that I don't have full awareness of all the things that I am.' [3]

[1] "Interview with Gregory Bae" Kelly Lloyd
[2] "Interview with Leah Capaldi" Kelly Lloyd
[3] "Interview with Leah Capaldi" Kelly Lloyd

Graphic Element by Talha Islam

It seems deeply important to be fully aware of all of the things that you are, even when you don't always get to act it out, because you're the glue that's holding everything together, you're the one who has to carry your ambition, you're the one steering your ship. Talking to Gordon Hall about what an art education can give you (in addition to a ton of debt for both Gordon and I), Gordon said,

'I wouldn't trade in my experience of V.C.S. for anything, personally. In terms of the way it helped me, like, develop as a thinker, and as an artist (nobody's paying me to say this, by the way), you know, and ultimately that's what being an artist is to me, it means I am excited living in my own mind forever. My best companion is, like, in the world of my studio.'[4]

So even though we are alone, how can we be our own best companions?

[4] "Interview with Gordon Hall" Kelly Lloyd

Kelly Lloyd is a trans-disciplinary artist who focuses on issues of representation and knowledge production, and prioritises public-facing collaborative research.

City Centre

Julian Day

I'm tempted to think of this city as a Utopia but I'm told that I'd be wrong.

Eisenhüttenstadt is a small industrial city on the eastern-most edge of Germany. From the city centre, close to the single-storey shopping center called City Center, you can walk to Poland in half an hour. On your way to the river Oder, long the natural border and, since 1945, renewed officially, you'd pass a rapid sequence of architectures: neo-Bauhaus apartment blocks, boarded up industrial lots, a recently upgraded train station, and, improbably, a beautifully maintained thirteenth century town Fürstenberg (Oder), the newer city's Dorian Gray twin.

Tripadvisor notes that Eisenhüttenstadt "is a museum in itself." Like all cities, I guess this is true, but it's hardly a tourist destination. For the week I spent there last August, amid a heatwave that even I as an Australian found a bit much, it felt molten, mute. At best, then, a time capsule still buried.

Eisenhüttenstadt was established in 1950 by the Deutsche Demokratische Republik as the sapling country's first socialist city, an experiment in top-down collectivity and a showroom for its success. Initially, it facilitated a singled industry, emblematized by the central steelworks (the city's name translates variously as "iron huts city," "iron foundry city," or "iron works city"). Steel is still manufactured in this hulking conurbation, once known as the J.V. Stalin Iron Smelting Plant, but it functions with a tenth of its former workforce. On reunification, the factory was sold by the state and it is now owned by the Luxembourg-Indian conglomerate ArcelorMittal, the second largest steel manufacturer in the world. I hear that the workers are well-paid, which is heartening for a city in apparent decline, but it means they bypass the flats designed to house them in favour of spacious plots in the countryside.

Julian Day is an artist, writer, and composer who addresses the sociopolitics of group formation and discrepancies in civic space.

Of the apartment towers still standing, radiating in efficient clusters from the main street, most appear only half-occupied. Eisenhüttenstadt has been losing people at a startling rate. Over the past three decades its populace has more than halved, the unintended result of the democracy that so visibly conquered it thirty years ago. This leaves a misshapen demographic outline: less than one in fifty of its residents are newborns, and nearly a third are over sixty-five.

I recognize this eerie stasis from Bendigo, the rural city in which I was born. Neither are technically empty but both live on as ghosts, mismatched between purpose and consequence. Both were founded upon singular extractive materials: in Eisenhüttenstat it was steel, in Bendigo, gold. In the late nineteenth century, Bendigo's rapidly-tapped natural resources briefly made it the wealthiest city in the world, underwriting not only Melbourne's extravagant architecture but the British Empire's entire foreign debt.

At first I thought of Eisenhüttenstadt as a Utopia in freefall or, to paraphrase Samantha Fox's anthropologal dissertation on the city, a Utopia in search of an afterlife. A German-born art professor I recently met, however, suggests that this was never quite the case. Unlike a traditional Utopia, Eisenhüttenstadt wasn't designed to be perfect - a blueprint so pristine it could do nothing but collapse - but as a practical, if ideologically-driven, solution to practical post-war needs.

What, then, are the iron city's post-DDR needs? It has been said that "poverty preserves," and in Bendigo a century of economic decline at least saved a surplus of Victorian buildings, newly attractive for investors pushed out of Melbourne. Its grandiose municipal halls are now ripe for arts events, and a recent swell of ambitious exhibitions and festivals have lifted local spirit.

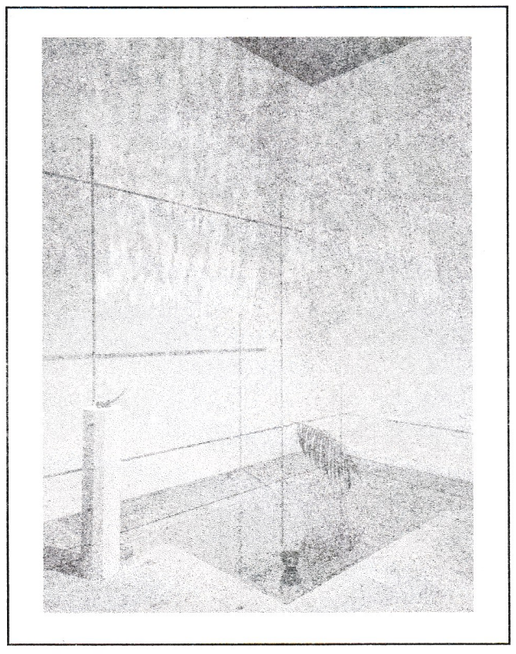
Eisenhüttenstadt's residents do not appear burdened by its history, but the city itself recalls. My hotel is a block away from a public square called Platz des Gedenkens. Remembrance Square. It used to be called Platz der Deutsch Sowjetischen Freundschaft, or the Square of the German-Soviet Friendship. For its first Cold War decade the city was known as Stalinstadt, to which a single, thin stone tower at the head of the square, the Soviet War Memorial, is the most obvious nod. Like the surrounding streets, the Platz is usually deserted but somehow feels more so than elsewhere. Of course, the war in Ukraine casts a new shadow. The curator I work with tells me that unlike last year the square attracts regular protests. Until now, the only such gatherings I'd registered were the ageing left-wing protesters assembling outside the Friedrich Wolf Theater each Monday night and the more occasional AfD blow-ins who make the news. This is another similarity with my hometown: both lure congregations of neighbouring rightwing aggressors who whip up media-savvy turmoil and leave residents to bear the residue. Paul Walsh asks: "is precarity a state, a condition, a process, or something else?"[1].At this point in history, precarity is usually discussed within the context of neoliberal tectonics. The precariat proper are those pushed aside by the global capitalist turbine, which in my usual city of New York manifests as too many Deliveroo drivers. In this sense, Eisenhüttenstadt does not feel precarious, at least not day by day. Its economy, whilst fragile, is stable; its best-preserved apartment complexes are safely suspended, their residents buoyed by government support. But the city is fragmenting and contracting. The austere Soviet-era towers on the city's fringe that stoke my modernist design urges will soon be demolished. The pristine 1950s Fotoatelier on the main street has long been curtained up, its windows daubed in hand-scrawled pink marker. In this sense, then, the city functions less in a state of precarity and more in *precariousness*. It lacks an obvious sense of purpose and thus anything to propel itself beyond subsistence. The precariat here do not drive eScooters but they have no greater mobility. Whilst the neon City Center sign burns brightly over the sprawling carpark be-

This is the hope of the Kunstverein im Kloster Neuzelle, Eisenhüttenstadt's nascent arts body: that artists - those most itinerant, and steeliest, of precariats - might step in and repurpose the city towards cultural ends. The Kunstverein comprises a varied team of local constituents and operates parasitically, grazing from site to site and partner to partner as new projects unfold. To date the most visible outcomes have included an annual symposium Zwischen Modell und Museum (Between Model and Museum) and a range of site-specific artistic interventions in rogue locations.

Since the early months of the pandemic I have worked with curator Niklas Nitschke on my own slow-build suite of works that so far includes narrated video, installation components, and performative strategies within such public spaces as Remembrance Square. The impetus for me has been twofold: to continue a recent ethnographic turn in my practice that had manifested in a two-year engagement with a community descended from Prussian refugees in, of all places, South Australia; and to apply a decade's worth of cohort-building sonic strategies to this remarkable post-Utopian landscape. The latter has proven a challenge, not least due to language (neither my German or Russian is passable), but I pursue my instinct that, as Davina Cooper proposes in her titular book[2], 'everyday Utopias' might fill in the precarious afterimages of the socialist experiment.

[1] Paul Walsh, "Precarity," *ELT Journal* 73, no.4 (2019): 459

[2] Davina Cooper, Everyday Utopias: The Conceptual Life of Promising Spaces (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2013)



Installation view of *Haris Epaminonda, VOL. XVII*, at the 58th Venice Biennale. Photograph by *Harrison Taylor*.

Harrison Taylor is a writer and artist based in Oxford and London

A Note on Precarity

Harrison Taylor

Precarity's etymological lineage speaks to its humanist interpretation, that of an existence marked by an absence of predictability and welfare. One might place this particular subject on unsteady ground at the precipice of a cliff. Other interpretations are formed under the umbrella of precarity as a concept: conditions of transience and instability, particularly when viewed in opposition to their antonyms. This vagueness makes precarity hard to define with its loaded slipperiness symbolic of precariousness itself, a small irony, but then again, how do we define 'art'?

Precariousness can be implied or found in all of the elements of an artwork – in its material, its presence, its relations, its reception; every part of an artwork that could form a conversation. I wondered if this meant that the substance had been diluted, that precarity had long lost a sense of potency, or directness. Walter Benjamin would have had it that way: a cultural substance mechanically reproduced to death. Conversely, David Joselit spoke of this kind of saturation as one that had achieved the effect of 'buzz', where a concept or an image happens to be everywhere at once. 'Buzz' is formed by myriad operators and producers that are acting independently of one another but eventually align in an organic swarm.

The term precarity resides at home in the vernacular of 'art-speak' as one of those capacious buzzwords which speaks to something different at every utterance, every liquid conversation which does the rounds between artists, curators and institutions. It is one of a few terms that dominate the vernacular: 'precarity', 'opacity', 'infrastructures'. 6% of all articles on e-flux are tagged with one of these three buzzwords, and there are plenty more in use. It is saturation through mass circulation, words which have such ubiquity they quite literally seep through art.

Perhaps this is all precarity is- a concept formed from a million constituent parts that somehow operate with each other. Some parts are more noticeable (I see you, Queen bee), and others merely add to the steady low pitch hum. Its concept and presence in an artwork are malleable and attuned to the individual observer, and precarity lives and dies by this adaptability. Precariousness is precarious: never stable, never permanent.

I was recently thinking about the artist Haris Epaminonda. I first came across her work at the Venice Biennale in 2019 and was struck by the concise elegance of her work. Its bold economy was formed of incomplete objects and fragments from varying eras and cultures, which opened up chasms and cracks in the context that were for the observers to fill in. A sense of a present absence penetrated the space as the objects vacillated between past and present, producing many different plots and interpretations.

In the image, a vase sits by the corner of the gold leaf, bound by its reflection which sits parallel to the shimmering reflection of an exotic leaf, rested delicately on a geometric frame. On a plinth is perched a crustacean which sits with a structural poise. It's all a little otherworldly with tension ratcheted up by the sheer preciseness of everything. Human intrusion seems impolite, but necessary, and her installations verge or titillate on the edge of something. And what could I say that could bind these feelings, give sense to them? One answer would be to suggest that her work deals with precarity. Need I say more? Perhaps that feeling is enough in itself.

NIRIN and Decolonizing the Biennale

Brook Gurru Andrew Interview by Jason Waite

Jason Waite talked with Brook Gurru Andrew about the 22nd Biennale of Sydney he directed entitled NIRIN. Andrew is an artist of the Wiradjuri Nation (New South Wales, Australia) with Celtic ancestry, his rich, research-based practice and museum and archival interventions have activated alternative histories and made forgotten stories visible.

Jason Waite: Could you talk about the critical choice of the biennale title NIRIN, and its significance?

Brook Gurru Andrew: I was interested in this whole obsession that the academy, Indigenous people and all sorts of people have with the term 'decolonial' and, what does it mean to 'decolonize'? I was involved with the Van Abbemuseum in the Netherlands and their relationship with the L'internationale group. They had a conference at the Van Abbe where they wanted to look at how to "decolonise the museum."

I think that the way in which European museums approach the discourse, or North American institutions or throughout the Americas - because that term, decolonial, comes from the Americas –fits a particular trajectory that's not necessarily, from my perspective, a First Nations one. So, I started kind of thinking about, 'Well what is the decolonial?' – What does it mean to me? What does it mean to other people? What is its usefulness? In an institutional setting, what it seems to do is set a standard to reveal - it reveals what is lacking in a collection of a museum. And this in turn leads to a set of questions for the institution: What do we need to owe up to? What do we need to restitute or to repatriate?

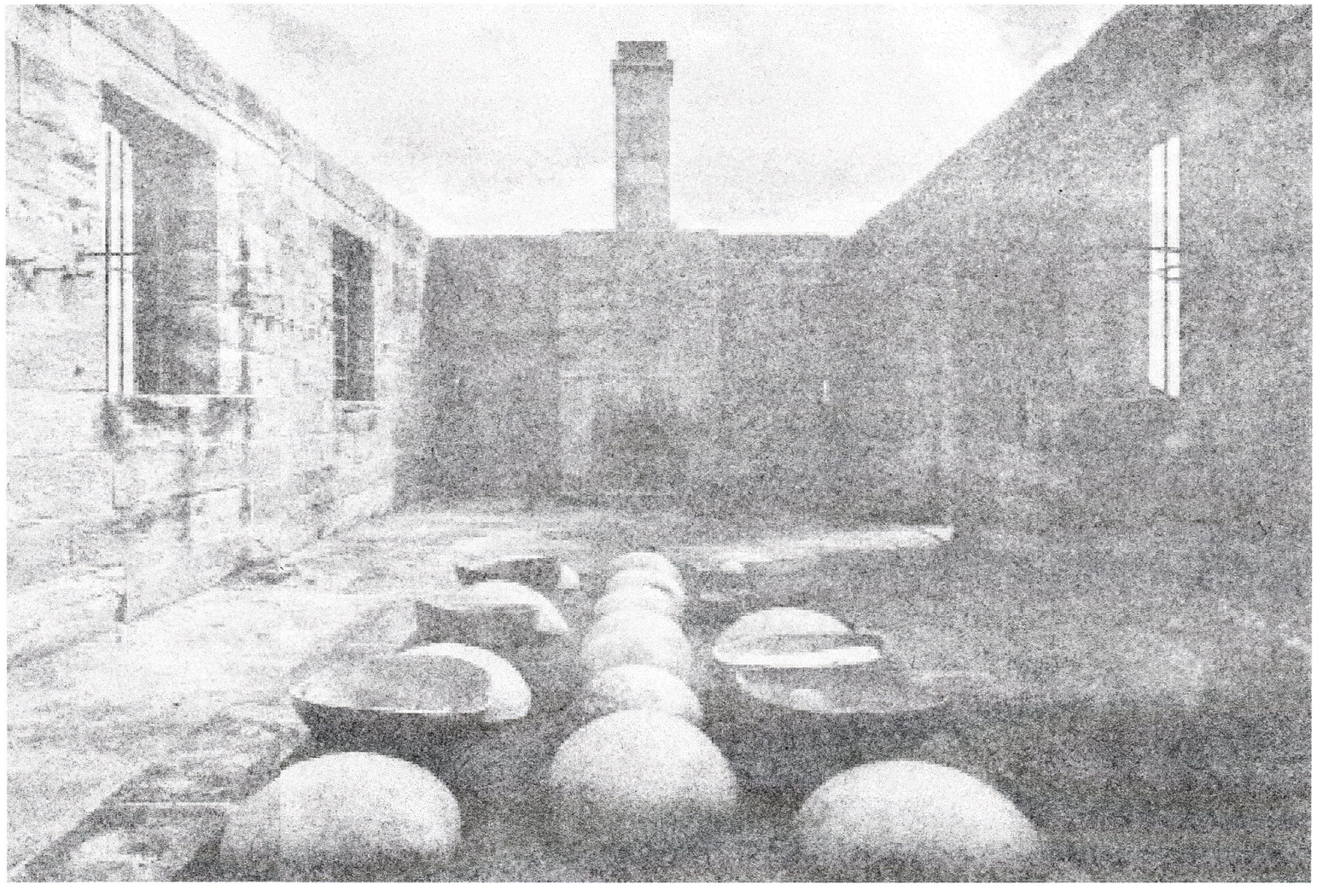
Returning to the word – the decolonial - as soon as you use english words or terminologies within the academy, they become firmly placed within that institutional strategy, framing the way in which ideas are formed or people have conversations or the way we move our body or the way in which art is placed within museums. It's a complete package.

Considering it was the International Year of Indigenous Languages in 2019, I really wanted to address language. So, I just thought that the best language I could use is my mother's language. And for me and my family, it is about edges. My grandmother grew up in a mission on Wiradjuri country. Her mother died when she was very young, and the family was split up and taken in by other family members and then eventually moved to Sydney.

Even within my own immediate Wiradjuri family there is divergence, my mother's father is Ngunnawal, while my father's family has Irish, Scottish, and Jewish ancestry.

Even within my own immediate Wiradjuri family there is divergence, my mother's father is Ngunnawal, while my father's family has Irish, Scottish, and Jewish ancestry. What are these edges? What are these borders? What are boundaries? I really wanted to use an Aboriginal word to bring it together, for people to interpret or reinterpret from a new space so it wasn't so fixed like the decolonial. It was more about being playful and being open. That's why in the catalogue I asked the question to each artist – 'What is NIRIN to you? / What is the edge to you?' - and they all have really quite exciting answers.

Gina Athena Ulysse, An Equitable Human Assertion Rasanblaj I, 2020. Installation view for the 22nd Biennale of Sydney (2020), Cockatoo Island. Commissioned by the Biennale of Sydney with generous support from Open Society Foundations, and assistance from the United States Government and NIRIN 500 patrons. Courtesy the artist. Photograph: Jessica Maurer.

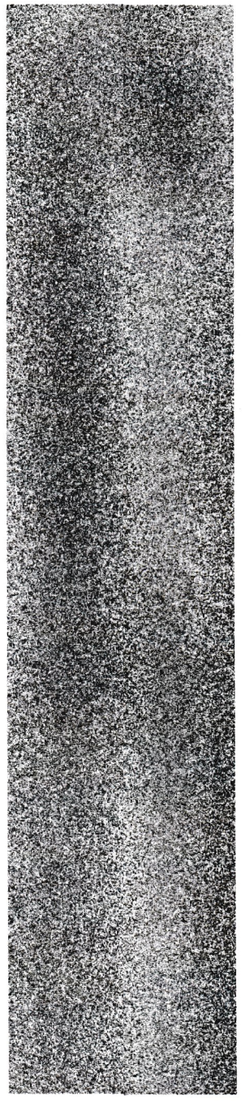


JW: The way that you bring up the kind of movement of people and questions around identity and identity being located inside the body as a material condition – thinking about the state and the history of the state as also being a body that contains very specific material locations. Some of the biennale venues such as the Gallery of New South Wales or Cockatoo Island can be seen as contested sites with potentially problematic histories. How did you approach the concentration of the nation-state in those sites?

BGA: It's interesting because I think that most art galleries or spaces of exhibition in– well, especially in Sydney, are colonial buildings, and so they're all loaded. The National Art School was the first major gaol for the penal colony of New South Wales. The Artspace was a major warehouse for the early colony as well. I think that the only space that doesn't have that kind of relationship to history and colonialism and that kind of scarring that you're talking about is probably Campbelltown Art Centre. Also, the Museum of Contemporary Art is located in Circular Quay which is the site of the first colonial settlement in Sydney, where the First Fleet landed in 1788. The area remained a centre of trade between Britain and its colonies into the twentieth century. The Art Deco museum originally housed the Maritime Services Board and is located next to the Customs House which was operational from 1845 until 1990. So, even after the early colonial period and the dispossession of the Gadigal from their traditional lands, the area remained a site of colony.

It really depended on how the artist wanted to engage in those sites, and especially Cockatoo Island which is a complicated site of trauma. The important meeting place for the Eora became a penal establishment under the British in 1839 and they built war ships there through the first and second world wars. Artists like Gina Athena Ulysse really wanted to be in this site being an anthropologist, Haitian performance artist, and feminist. The site that she worked with at Cockatoo Island is the former gun storeroom of the British convict gaol, and she ended up transforming that space. The artwork *An Equitable Human Assertion Rasanblaj I* (2020) is a healing space using calabash and performative elements.

The same with Jota Mombaça and Mohamed Bourouissa, a lot of artists used the sites to connect with Australian history or international Indigenous histories or futurisms. In this way, the biennale was very much artist-led.



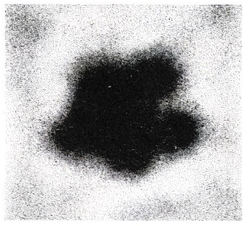
Teresa Margolles at the National Art School, her work was all about femicide. The murder of Indigenous women in Australia is, like in many other colonised nations, quite high. For her artwork, Teresa focused on women who were recently murdered around the Sydney region. With her collaborators and volunteers, the artist went out and gathered the essence of the sites through the agent of water, and then put that in the National Art School which was one of the first colonial gaols in Australia. So, from a site of trauma to another site of trauma. This work is driven in ways similar to the approach of Hannah Catherine Jones who created *Owed Bussa 2.0*, an immersive audio visual installation also presented at the art school. Hannah talks about wanting to address the "woe" as she calls it. In order to produce a sense of the healing and rallying in these spaces, there's this consciousness that's not hidden, I think it's very much on the surface.

JW: Can we talk about the interruption of the Biennale? Soon after the inauguration, COVID-19 forced a temporary closure of the Biennale. Arundhati Roy has asked this question about whether the virus can be a portal, and whether it is possible to think about the condition as a passageway to form a very different reality, perhaps, one we would like to see rather than the one we've been burdened with previously.

BGA: Yes, it's kind of a wound as well, right? I think that for many Indigenous people or people who have been dealing with quite difficult issues that the dominant narrative denies or ignores or closes down by putting a border up, these are wound spaces that are our home. We're kind of used to being in them. I think that in some ways, it's not really a shock and we just kind of move into the next thing. It's been very tragic for many people around the world and the death toll has been quite extraordinary and very sad. But I do think, in some ways, it's kind of a gift in disguise as well because the way in which we can look at the realities and urgencies that are already there before Covid. Through this experience what else has it opened up in this space? What has shifted?

Jason Waite is a curator, writer, and editor of *Art Review Oxford*

Brook Andrew is an artist, curator and scholar and is driven by the collisions of intertwined narratives, often emerging from the mess of the "Colonial Hole".



Semiotics of Art: A Brief Introduction

Talha Islam

For a field of study that is so high in its degree of complexity, semiology's aim is relatively straightforward: to take any gesture, substance, an object of art, pictograph, or anything that displays or demonstrates *something*, and reduce it to a system of signification. Charles Sanders Peirce, an early proponent of this field, had (rather compellingly) proposed that semiology not only provides a structure of meanings to certain objects and practices, but that it also answers for our questions regarding reception, the decoding model of communication, and general methodologies of interpretation (hermeneutics, exegesis, etc.). Everything is compelled to, according to Peirce, transmit a coded message formed of discontinuous signs, and it is the viewer's (or in some cases, the participant's) duty to uncover these signs and symbols, no matter how cryptic they may seem, and denote the meaning behind that 'thing'. Roland Barthes, in drawing a distinction between a drawing and a photograph, explains the three things we must acknowledge when analysing a drawing by its coded nature:

1. '…to reproduce an object or a scene in a drawing requires a set of rule-governed transpositions; there is no essential nature of the pictorial copy and the codes of transposition are historical'

2. '… the operation of the drawing (the coding) immediately necessitates a certain division between the significant and the insignificant: the drawing does not reproduce everything (often it reproduces very little), without ceasing, however, to be a strong message'

3. 'Finally, like all codes, the drawing demands an apprenticeship' ('apprenticeship' here meaning learnedness)

This is a model form of structuralist thinking where every aspect of lived experience is reduced into a repository of 'cultural codes'. Art becomes something that is entirely ideological, serving an agenda, and of an iconic dimension.

Before exploring whether semiotics ascribes to this view, it is best, first, to discuss how the production of meaning occurs – semiosis (the performance element involving signs). At its most fundamental, a sign is comprised of two components; the *signifier*, which is recognised as the 'plane of expression', and the *signified*, the 'plane of content'. The former is viewed as the material form, the thing that is seen or heard by the sign, and the latter is the very concept of it. Ferdinand de Saussure coined these terms in a purely linguistic frame of reference, answering for the relationship that exists between the sound-image of a word and its concept of it. When viewing a piece of art, however, the relationship between the *signifier* and the *signified* becomes more convoluted as it, unlike the signs produced by any unit of language, displays all its components simultaneously rather than sequentially – the signifier and the signified amalgamate into one, with a thin degree of time separating the two.

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Semiotics of art is concerned primarily with the 'reception' of the artwork. The intelligibility of the artwork to the viewer, the methods and steps the viewer takes to assemble all the elements of the artwork (texture, colour, space, shape) into a common space, and the inferences the spectator makes from the work of art, all serve as means by which a sign or symbol is produced. When we consider this, a semiological investigation into art becomes near impossible, as all 'signs' that can be interpreted from an artwork are entirely subjective. While a meaning of a word or a sentence is itself denoted variably by the reader, the sound-image produced will nevertheless be intersubjective. Semiotics becomes (and I borrow these words from Deleuze) the possibility of passing from subjective to the objective pole.

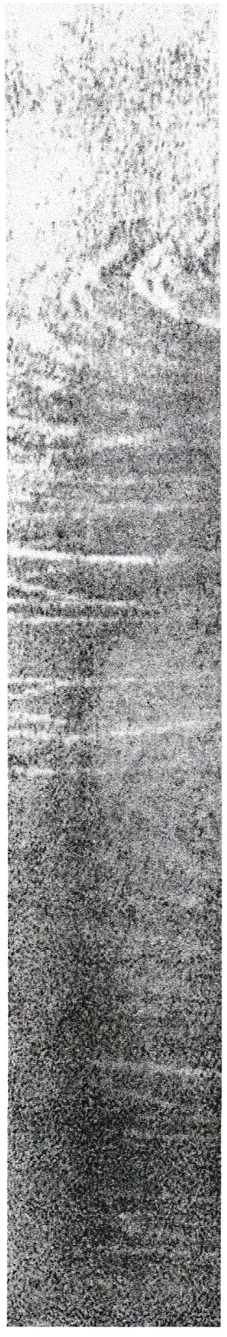
The question at the heart of the semiotics of art has always been whether a semiotic inquiry into art is even *necessary*. I realised, after reading the below remark Deleuze makes, that there is another, equally important question that should be considered:

… if a linguistically inspired semiology troubles me, it is because it suppresses the notion of the image and of the sign. It reduces the image to an utterance, which seems very strange to me. (Gilles Deleuze, Cinema II).

The question is this: is semiotics *harmful* to the study of art? Reducing art to a mere instrument of visual communication diminishes any kind of aesthetic value that it has. In turning any piece of art into bits of communicative data, we risk insulting our own perceptual experiences that are otherwise beyond description. The very act of making art, whether it is painting, sculpturing, performing, or filming, is, in itself, a perceptual experience that can be, and oftentimes is, desiccated of any rationale. No artist is ever obligated to follow a sequential thought process (unless, of course, the art is commissioned, or used for the purpose of advertising, such as Barthes' example of the *Pazzani* cheese advert), and this by implication means that no artist is ever obligated to treat their work as something of complete purpose.

This is all very surface level. The argument of whether art serves a purpose, or whether it is a complete abstraction, has been debated for centuries. But it is nevertheless a discussion that takes place, and will continue to take place, at the centre of the semiotics of art. Semiotics insists that not only does a work of art allow itself to be analysed and determined by a signifying system, but that it also grows into a signifying system once it is in full completion. Hegel writes in the same spirit as the semioticians (by no means am I asserting that he is a proto-semiotician) that have come a century or so after him when he exclaims, after asserting that art begins with an idea that is in its 'indeterminacy and obscurity', that

> '(the) first form of art is therefore rather a mere search for portrayal than a capacity of true presentation; the Idea has not found the form even in itself and therefore remains struggling and striving after it. We may call this form, in general terms, the symbolic form of art.' (*Aesthetics: Lectures on Fine Art*)



Notice here how he removes the artist out of the equation as he speaks of art's desire for true presentation. Hegel, rather discreetly, insinuates that it does not matter if the artist is resistant to meaning. Once the artwork is completed, it stands autonomously and asserts a meaning for itself. Even if the artwork is absent of any meanings, it joins the sign of 'no-meaning', where the absence of meaning is, on its own merits, full of a range of meanings. Levi-Stauss terms such meanings as 'floating signifiers', and to Barthes, one of the greatest examples of a 'floating signifier' is the Eifel Tower – a monument that, due to its spareness, serves as an empty sign – but one that is loaded with a range of meanings such as 'modernity, rocket, Paris … or Phallus' (*The Companion to Art Theory*)

The death of the 'artist', a thought that is more or less derivative of Barthes' own philosophy on the author, is, I would say, a base principle that semioticians have to believe in if they were to see an artwork as a system of signs. Signs are iterative, and we can suppose that they do not belong to any one context but a plurality of them. In fact, signs function in such a way that they continually shape their own history of its development. Semiotics allows us to view an artwork as something that is not placed in its context, but completely open, and where its history is no longer treated as a substructure that answers for all our uncertainties about the work.

Now we have a paradox. When one partakes in a semiological study of art, they place themselves in a position that views art as something that can be reduced to Deleuze's 'utterances'. Once the artwork is codified, we can assume that it will be reduced to a language that speaks with complete objectivity. The aesthetic value of the artwork can be thrown out the window as we claim that reception is entirely logical and straightforward. On the other hand, to be a semiotician of art is to also make the claim that any artwork is not restricted by any temporal condition; that it is outside of context, and hence its reception can be constituted by a variety of viewers at different times and at different places. This places an immeasurable amount of aesthetic value on any artwork.

My argument is that there is no 'one' way of approaching the semiotics of art. There is a diverse range of communication models that can be used to explain semiosis – all of which argue, on quite a contrasting level, how the relationship between the *signifier* and the *signified* function (Umberto Eco's content and expression; Peirce's sound-image and concept; Barthes' form and concept). Semiologists also ascribe themselves to a different set of views regarding the order of meanings, from metalanguage to denotation/connotation, to staggered systems. Out of all the paths an aspiring semiologist can take, it is Derrida's view of how signs are registered that is most compelling and most applicable to the field of art (in my opinion). Meaning arose, according to him, from one signifier to the other, and that there is no end to the process of semiosis. Viewing art is a never-ending process of finding a meaning that is always 'deferred' (différance).

REVIEW

Sick Architecture

CIVA, Brussels

Jason Waite

While the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic and lockdowns are immediately conjured with the exhibition title Sick Architecture, this provocative show puts forward a broader thesis of how buildings themselves have made humanity ill.

The research-heavy show composed by Beatrice Columina and Nikolaus Hirsch challenges the notion of the home as shelter, and instead takes as its starting point for how humans developed diseases such as tuberculous from moving indoors—even as early as the Stone Age. Jumping to the turn of the twentieth century, the exhibition argues that the development of modern interiors with white walls, hard floors, and smooth surfaces have originated from the development of sanatoriums for the treatment of TB. To underscore this dramatic shift, a poster from 1927 depicts a typical Victorian interior—heavy drapes, fabric wall-cover, and knick-knacks—with a giant red "X" over the image to highlight the dangers of this space in gathering dust that the tuberculous bacteria traveled on. If this proof holds — that it was bacteria which altered the course of the lived environment of the last century — it still remains to be seen if and how the present virus will have the same durational effect on our surroundings. Yet prognostication is not the remit of this show, but rather, an unpacking of the social, political, colonial, economic, and non-human forces that shape the lived world.

The first works in the show are a series of found pills by architect Hans Hollein, delicately mounted on paper with titles such as "non-physical environment." They allude to the pharmacological and perhaps even psychedelic states that these pills "construct" in the interior of the mind. This opening gambit subverts the expectation of space as a material place, while gesturing toward the cerebral nature of the exhibition that blurs research and artistic intervention—a distinction at times difficult to assess.

Officine's brilliant exhibition design employs a visually-vibrating green carpet on which free-standing acrylic folding walls seem to float. Their transparency provides the possibility to look through multiple layers of the exhibition, yet provides a challenging arrangement as most objects can be seen both from the front with their backside often visible in the project on the other side of the glass wall. Curator Silvia Franceschini deftly orchestrated the space, which appears to be a giant version of Aby Warburg's Mnemosyne Atlas, yet instead of a rigid framing, the transparent acrylic allows for a diverse reading overlapping projects and concepts.

Amidst this recombinable atlas, researcher Dante Furioso highlights colonial enclosure from disease and the environment writ large. Their project, Sanitary Imperialism, traces the US colonial architecture in the Panama Canal Zone through images of the mesh-enclosed homes, gazebos, and a hat serving as a platform for a net draped over a man smoking a pipe. If colonialism constructs a veil between indigenous populations and settlers, the project effectively underscores how the fear of illness forces the settlers into protective cages of their own making. Artist Sammy Baloji depicts how this separation is not limited to intimate space but spilled forth into civic planning. His large-scale aerial photographs of Lubumbashi highlights the "sanitary corridors" of over one hundred meters of open green space that Belgium had built between the settler and indigenous neighborhoods. Ostensibly, this was the distance that a mosquito could travel, so this racists buffer could be ascribed to the wing size of insects. In contrast, a nourishing greenhouse for the mind is detailed in Mohamed Bourouissa's film chronicling the relationship between a patient and the doctor/writer Frantz Fanon at the Blida-Joinville Psychiatric Hospital in Blida, Algeria, where gardening was developed as a therapeutic. The extensive catalogue of sanitary segregation, from immigration policy on Ellis and Angel Islands, to self-supported disabled towns established in Europe after WW1, the exhibition is critical wunderkammer of the legacy of health structuring space and society—a discourse that is urgently needed at this threshold of viral transformations.

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REVIEW

Jesse Darling: No Medals No Ribbons

Modern Art Oxford

Devika Pararasasinghe

In an age of historical repetition and seeking grounding in the furrow, it is far from the best use of time to bang your head against something harder than a wall – or to climb a ladder into a scratched-out hole seeking an age of ending. No Medals No Ribbons, is artist Jesse Darling's homecoming to their largest exhibition to date – it is an expansive proclamation of a seemingly unending labour and a restless exercise in rising and winding-down scale. Some of the works on show couldn't apply pressure to a papercut, while other works a single jerk to a threaded moment could pull everything apart.

This excursion of the last 10-years, of narrative building practice is Sisyphean in its act of making. Darling makes bodily monument of the everyday object – in so much it's almost becoming universal-hymn. The lentils, matchsticks, tea-towels, concrete, industrial-steel, and childlike memorandum - with the particular object recurrences of the [paper]planes, lions, horses and the never forgone [wounded] birds, traced in plain sight, - it's all this and so much more. Darling turns the bull loose on the domestic and the disavowed – it's like vanitas, but really real this time.

We enter to *Gravity Road* 2020, an epic which reels on the plagued ideological. It centres on what drunken metal can cradle, the fluctuations of which are deep, industrial and historical; an 1887 roller-coaster revisited – a 'happiness machine', where people record goodwill on a quotation of fear – on kindling as subjugation, - and yet pay nonetheless. The steel-railing is warped to no favour, pulling, teasing and following through with no crash-landing, only buried flowers – it's a daggered invitation to spiral out. This catered disfunction reckons with another rather prevalent motif in their work: the use of the crutch – a literal one, of which bends witness to Darling's own body: this w[e]lding spine carved, quartered body, spools heavy as the structure-holding in many of their works - string-pulling the durability and all its accompanying survival-ecologies. Here to the nesting-in rough, bits and starts that make-up the material-inventory of Darling's works, for it is what makes us all well. A snake-oil-salesperson whose medicine heals – for the crutch is never just a support, it's a feeder - *an organiser of being itself.*

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Metaphors are not dead – for everything's a metaphor with *Epistemologies*, 2022 - the lever-archer files with place-holder concrete-cast slabs inside, casually hold the weight of bureaucracy in its most perfectly heavy-handed form. The work is staple and held in space with *Gravity Road* and its stories of exploited laboured lives and industry. The institution implication continues in the following rooms ahead: *Equestrian statue* 2015, a steel pram frame playing a small horse, - confides that it's all hubris, but it implores a counter, a resistance to couched power-structures. A strike against those politician testimonials standing far too tall, on a plinth over us all. This feeling carries through, with *Virgin Variations* 2019 and *Icarus drives it in (temporary relief)* 2018 are examples in Darlings 's show which flirt with that which are handmaiden to capital - the cases, collections, the empty ossuary and display orientations which taunt to make another artifice-making hero. These empire vestiges of plastic-flowers, toilet-rolls, packing-peanuts, empty wine bottles and more - hold stake in memory, architecture and lost souls - that of which make a holding, a sh[r]ine incubated to many a now revered and domestic[ated] object. The work is an antagonism to those blue-blooded still wanting a free-ride; and for what is now seen before me as registered archival-unbecoming, in hostage-taking wooden locker-room boxes.

These objects are inexplicably seized from the everyday, but are treated by Darling to never be considered banal – we live and share our spaces with these objects; so even without the corpus present, they are very much bodily and fevered with complication. Speaking to the consentingly-modern and harboured old material: the plastic bag [one of many petrochemical-born materials employed] is intriguing. Not just as its immortality exceeds our own; these once fossils are brought back to use, they're rowdy spirits – so much so - it's hard-back [text, rhetoric] in Darlings 's toil. This unwelcome ghost, a bad thing – here and anthropomorphised – features as quite a prolific idea and habits multiple sub-structures, - in the case of *Untitled (Morrison's)* 2013/2018 it becomes an animal-hide on ceremonial-display and in *Material Girl* 2014, [a plastic-bag dress-pattern strung up by steel and rope] - it's a girlhood-vernacular, that's now in fetters. This of which is curated in appropriate territory with *Uh oh baby she's a tourist* 2017/2022, silicon-cast breasts on a wielded steel crutch-holding – out of the co-

I wait on more drawings, *Big Voice (Libidinal Economies 1)*, 2021 is a stage for a drawn-in act of self-[re]creation, an unravelling of a loose thread now animated. Darling uses drawing as a mechanism of self-living, - to go for more than a detritus as a self-reckoning. They twist through a tale to make, but then to continue to make more.
Another relished constant that Darlings feeds is the fable, particularly of the resilient image of St Jerome and the Lion, in the works of guarding, *Sphinxes of the gate (Wounded sentry)* 2018, and *Sphinxes of the gate (Pet sentry)* 2018, it's almost pinching in its attachment – to reside in you to fall out of the faith you grew up in. Darling allows with these myths re-registered, that when knowing is received it transforms you, - maybe, ethically so. Knowledge is not something to be owned, or to be in a position of disposition. This from Darling is self-referential, [y]our autobiography in equal and explicit measure, the histories, parables fold into how we field another own goal. *No Medals, No Ribbons*, is all that personified, and all that potential produces encroachment: tugged on hooks, eyes, humans, to push in/out, - and to those who were laughed at before, now become cartilage and crossed-fingers, confetti and ribbons. A silver medal [a]new, under the sun.

REVIEW

56th Venice Biennale

Jason Waite

While the Venice Biennale has taken on a prominence amongst mega shows, it also has a critically important local history and influence—one which this year's 56th edition did not evade like past Italian curators, but rather confronted directly. The weight of curating the Biennale is a heavy burden for any curator but most acutely daunting for Italians, where "la Biennale" has a taken on an almost mythic stature. In the past twenty years the Venice Biennale has had only three Italian curators, each one has had their own way of dealing with this weight. In 2001, Francesco Bonami— following on the recent internationalization of the art world and the multicultural rhetoric of the 1990s—invited a diverse cast of prominent curators including Hou Hanru, Carlos Basualdo, Molly Nesbit, Hans Ulrich Obrist, Rikrit Tiravanija, and Gilane Tawardos among others to make their own mini-shows the composite of which was the Biennale. This gesture of hospitality fostered a curatorial wunderkammer with an overflowing abundance, but at the same time removed Bonami from an authorial role. In 2013, Massimilano Gioni, focused his Biennale on "outsider art" a "new" concept for Italy. Gioni interwove an international cast of artists within and around these "outside", largely autodidact practitioners. This exhibition largely avoided a canonical discussion that created this (false) dichotomy between the contemporary art world and outsiders, instead Gioni moved to expand the notion of art writ large to include a variety of diverse practices without addressing the underlying problematics that has enclosed the art world. In the show there was a heavy handed focus on biography of these outsiders, and, at times, a curatorial cooption of their practices to fulfill the condition of the "outsider" based on their circumstances such as mental/physical disability or isolated geography.

In contrast to these past curatorial approaches to the Biennale—of evacuation, in the case of Bonami or expanding the concept of art for Gioni—this year's artistic director Celcia Alemani decided to directly address the problematic of an Italian curating the Biennale by questioning the historical ground that makes the task so burdensome. In Italy (and elsewhere), contemporary art and the history of art has been particularly limited to largely male canon of Italian artists (and curators). And a discussion of foundational movements from the Renaissance, Futurism, to Surrealism that still haunt many artists working in Italy today.

Alemani's Biennale inhabited by a majority of female, trans, and gender non-conforming artists, did not side step these dominate art historical movements, but rather shook them loose of all of the expected names and out of this reckoning rose those overshadowed, overlooked, or excluded participants—and sometimes critical forces—in these past movements. These artists filled explicitly historical sections of the Biennale called "time capsules" that contested the white patriarchal histories of Italian (and European) modern and contemporary art. The time capsules were not achronic but rather contained some of the most poignant and prescient artworks and formed one of the strongest curatorial gestures in the recent history of the Venice Biennale. A prime example of these time capsules was "The Witch's Cradle" in the Central Pavilion.

At the heart of the central Pavilion mustard yellow carpet covers the floor and climbs up part of the curved sides of walls—a scene that looks like a hybrid of Peggy Guggenheim's Art of this Century Gallery and La Monte Young's *Dream House*. The room is dotted with vitrines and small works on paper delicately hung on the walls, such as Benedetta's drawings of forceful geometries centered questions of gender and the occult, developing the aesthetic and poetic language of Futurism. While Toyen's barren landscapes of dismembered bodies, vacant bird cages, and fields of barbed wire grounded the figurative tradition of Surrealism with the terrifying imaginary provoked by the start of the Second World War. Also on display is an excerpt from Mary Wigman's 1930 expressionist dance film *Hexentanz* explore gender fluidity through simple costumes and androgynous make-up. The diverse time capsule demonstrates that these artists were not outsides of these movements but rather integral to them and developing different strains of research within them which are even more resonate today. The fact that this case needs to be made—and in an international biennale—highlights still how much work there is to be done to address these woeful incomplete accounts of history. Yet at the same time the capsules, situated inside an ostensibly contemporary biennale, produced a vibrant sense of world-making that liberated the historical tethers of the artwork to highlight their persistent radicality.

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Elsewhere in the Central Pavilion there was a reduction of walls that made the space even more maze-like than usual, which was effect at thwarting any linear reading of the exhibition—or history more broadly. This was complimented by such productive juxapositions such as Cecilia Vicuña's hanging *precarios* and a selection of her paintings with Mrinalini Mukherjee's large woven sculptures. Elsewhere Louise Lawler and Alexandra Pirici's formed an intergenerational immersive space and performance. Other contemporary standouts in the Central Pavilion were Kudzai-Violet Hwami's spatial collages and Amy Sillman's large gestural washes on paper.

The other venue the of the Biennale, the Arsenale, continued with an intervention of time capsules including photos and remakes of Lavina Schulz and Walter Holdt's Weimar era playfully expressionist dance costumes, yet the Arsenale also reverted to a more expected Biennale format of large scale contemporary installations and series. It was this more traditional display of contemporary art in the Arsenale and the more historically focused interventions in the Central Pavilion which seemed to split the audience with some favoring location or the other this year—even more than previous editions. There were a number of notable new works in the Arsenale including Gabriel Chalie's large scale Pre-Colombian ovens; the packed earthwork of Delcy Morelos that formed a terrestrial maze; Candice Lin's re-combination of acient figurative forms with living plants and small technological components; and Zhang Bo's inverted video of nudes seeming to float in the wilderness. Toward the end of the Arsenale the there seemed to be a futures trope which was a bit heavy handed as it was the primary location for a number of East Asian artists and culminating with a dystopic-American-fascist-style installation by Barbara Kruger. However the footnote around the corner held a more interesting vision of the future with Diego Marcon's sardonic claymation-opera and the immersive garden of Precious Okoyama that manifest an alternative world complete with running streams and totemic organic sculptures—a terra-formation that invites a different set of relationships between culture and nature.

One of the threads running through national pavillions this year was voluntary displacement to make space for non-national entities such as the Nodic Pavilion giving way to the brillant, inagural Sami Pavilon with a tragic painting series by Anders Sunna, hanging sculptures and aorma by Máret Ánne Sara, and a powerful series of performances by Pauliina Feodoroff. Poland also gave way to the first Roma Pavilion curated by Joanna Warsza, with a strong series of paintings by Małgorzata Mirga-Tas that covered the walls of the space transforming into a figurative series of taronic scenes. Netherlands hosted Estonia to work through their own colonial entanglements in Indonesia, while Spain physically adjusted their pavilion to be on the same axis as the other pavilions in the row. Simone Leigh transformed the facade of the US Pavilion into with an interpretation of the Banga's people thatched architecture. Golden Lion winner Sonya Boyce also made an appearance in the neighboring French Pavilion that hosted Zineb Sedira poignant and complex love letter to cinema.

Underlying the power dynamics of the nation state, Pilvi Takala looks at how authority functions on the atomic scale through private mall security, unpacking group dynamics behind the tin blue line. If this is going to be Hong Kong's last independent presentation at the Biennale it went out on a high note with Angelika Li's installations and film. Uganda also made a strong first showing with the artists Acaye Kerunen and Collin Sekajugo.

Instead of a reflexive response to the present moment of crisis, the Biennale and many of the pavilions addressed the slow underlying currents that produced this moment and potentially have to affect the future. This temporal disjunction might be jarring for some but in it also opens up a space for a more reflective approach to transformation.