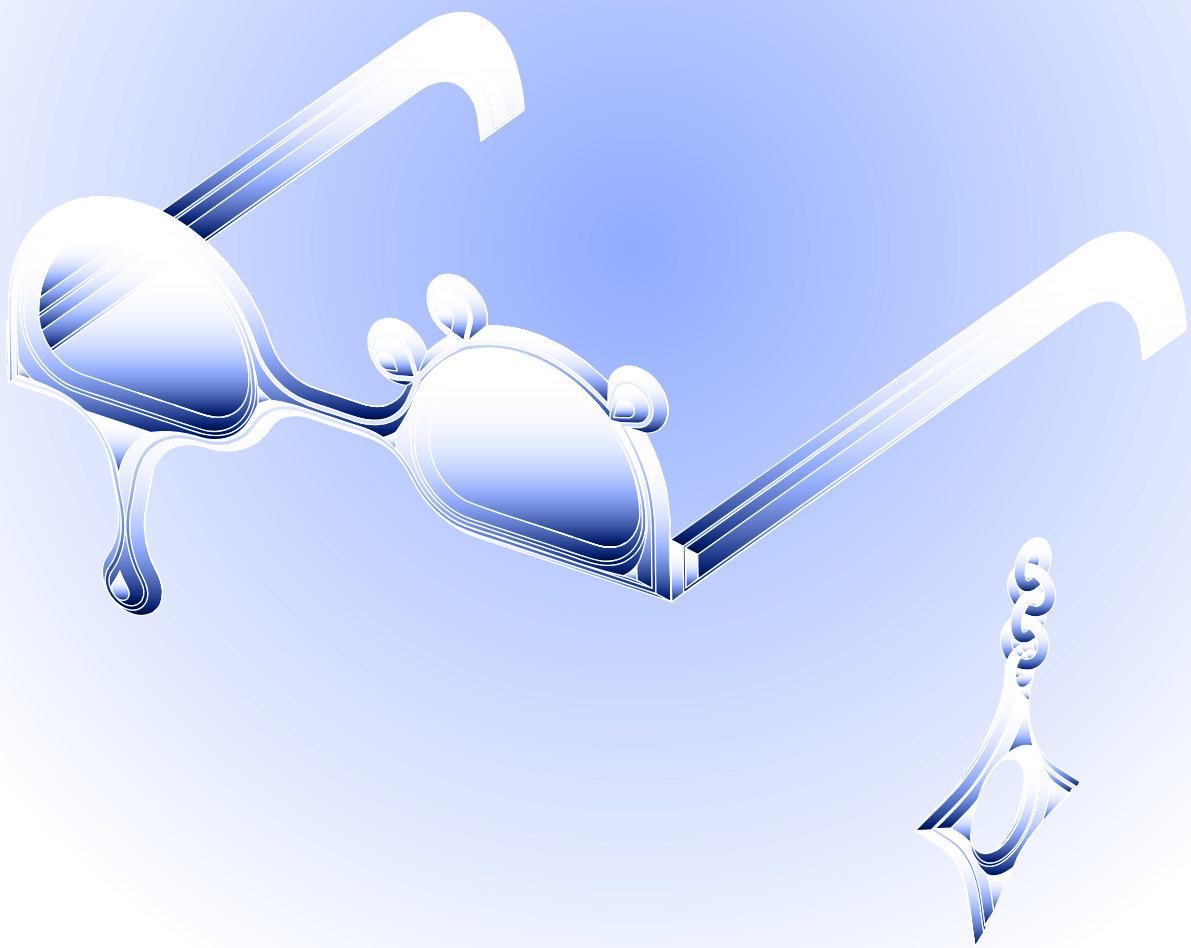
Art Review Oxford

State of Review



Winter 2026

Issue 13

State of Review

What role does art writing have today? In the old days, the critical fights on art were as much about ego and perspective as they were about staking claim to the limited number of pages and centimeters of space available for writers. Publishing was expensive and so this scarcity made it exclusive. At the same time there was always the underground of pamphlets and zines, creating an informal, if limited, circulation of difference. Then came the great leveling of the internet, the decline of print, the rise of social media, a flattening of the mainstream and underground into a single channel of accessibility. Gatekeepers also multiplied from editors, to page-ranking, to algorithms. While text was previously the most expeditious form of communication the circulations of images and moving images became easier through social media, instagram, tiktok, youtube, etc.

And yet art writing still exists in 2026. This issue attempts to review the review. Looking at the possible forms that art writing has branched out into. From the explicit harvesting of fragments, to the poetic, the sonic and transcription, the informal, the route, and the normative. The different typologies in this issue allude to the different channels through which one consumes ideas and distributes thoughts. It also takes into account where the study is located now, where do we write and where do we think,

While over the past eight years Art Review Oxford has created a website and shared more articles on social media, the heart of the publication is still its printed edition. The formation of the issue into the material of paper and ink put the writing into a world in a different way. The intimacy of reading print without notifications appearing on the top of the page. The longevity of a bound copy in our bedrooms, shelves, and libraries. The print copy is also a thing. In its germanic etymology a "thing" was a site, a meeting place where communities would gather to adjudicate conflicts, to share ideas, or exchange. This thing of Art Review Oxford brings together a multiplicity of voices, practices, and ideas. If art writing continues, so will we.

Jason Waite

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State of Review

Frank Wasser
Some brief notes and reflections on reviewing exhibitions (Mostly written on Public Transport)
05

Hannah Catherine Jones
Owed to Survivance [Tran]Script: An Excerpt
10

Lucy Grubb
The visitor, the octopus.
15

Sunil Shah
Review: Suzanne Treister, Modern Art Oxford
18

Jason Waite
Review: Mediacity Seoul Biennale
22

Jenny W. Tang
Review: Shu Lea Cheang, Haus der Kunst, Munich
25

Alejandro Soto-Chaves
Review: Beatriz González, The Barbican, London
30

Backpage: Xinyue Liu,
Officer at Work Bureau of Environmental Imaging and Memory Analysis, featuring Melody Li, 2025.

Frank Wasser

Some brief notes and reflections on reviewing exhibitions (Mostly written on Public Transport)

Frank Wasser is an artist and writer based between London, Vienna and Dublin.

This piece will take the form of a series of fragmented thoughts. I tend to write in fragments, on scraps of paper that are misplaced or discarded, in notes that accumulate without resolution, in places not designed to hold writing for very long. I'm not precious about it, though perhaps I should be. I own many notebooks, but often find myself resistant to them, as if the idea of continuity imposes a pressure that interrupts the act itself. Most of these were written over a period of 4 months on my way to work or the studio.

1. I often have a strong dislike for the act of writing. More precisely, I hate beginning to write. The blank page presents itself as an obstruction. It demands a decision before any thinking has properly taken place.

2. Film, television and the internet has warped the act of writing as a serious act.

3. Writing about an exhibition inevitably alters the exhibition. It isolates details, imposes sequences, produces emphasis where there may have been none. What is written circulates more easily than what was experienced, and gradually the text is mistaken as something that replaces the encounter.

4. I've sat beside too many posh poets who are full after one bite at press dinners.

5. Press releases seem to be getting steadily worse, particularly those produced by commercial galleries, overly polished, overextended, and often resistant to saying anything directly. Bring back BANK.

6. Criticism remains, to a large extent, a space structured by middle- and upper-class perspectives. Even attempts at accessibility often reproduce the same exclusions under different terms.

7. The increasing presence of generative Ai within publishing, particularly in magazines that begin with extended sequences of luxury advertising, creates a strange proximity between automation and aspiration. Language, like image, becomes optimised, smoothed, repeatable and frankly shit. The question of authorship feels less stable here, but not necessarily more open. Barthes had his death of the author and we have our zombie authors.

8. I write reviews in order to complicate my relationship to exhibition-making. Writing allows me to return to decisions I might otherwise accept, to test positions that were only partially understood in the moment. It is not a separate practice so much as a parallel one, moving alongside and sometimes against making.

9. Writing reviews has, at times, led others to suggest that I am not a "real" artist. This is usually presented as an observation rather than an argument, but it reveals a persistent division between writing and making, despite their long entanglement within contemporary practice, and wouldn't you rather an artist's writing on art? (It worries me reader that you may disagree with this)

10. Re-read. That last point was perhaps too cynical. Re-write.

11. Writing reviews has, at times, led others to suggest that I am not a "real" artist. This is often framed as a casual observation rather than a sustained argument, but it points to a lingering division between writing and making, despite their long entanglement within contemporary practice. I find myself wondering whether writing on art might benefit precisely from being done by artists, even as I remain aware that not everyone would agree with this position. (Better?)

12. The conventions of art criticism, particularly the review, have remained relatively stable. Even with the emergence of "art writing", many texts still follow a familiar structure: description, contextualisation, a movement through the exhibition, and an engagement with critical theory. While these elements are often reworked in

thoughtful ways, the overall framework tends to persist rather than fundamentally shift. At the same time, art criticism continues to reflect certain established perspectives. This is not always overt, but can be sensed in tone, in patterns of citation, and in how authority is distributed, where some positions are more readily recognised, while others take longer to gain visibility.

13. Increasingly, art criticism feels both overproduced and under-read. Texts appear rapidly, circulate briefly, and are just as quickly replaced. The accumulation is constant, but sustained engagement feels increasingly rare, as if writing struggles to hold attention over time.

14. The review often performs understanding rather than arriving at it. It adopts a tone of resolution, of having grasped something, while the process of writing itself may remain uncertain, provisional, and unresolved.

15. The degree of selective memory, and, at times, outright disregard for past positions (particularly in relation to art criticism platforms), can feel difficult to ignore. It raises the question of how these affiliations continue without more sustained reflection or accountability. Why are you posting Artforum articles when you signed a Boycott barely 2 years ago?

16. For some, writing about art risks replacing the experience of looking with the authority of language. The text stabilises what was contingent, making it more accessible, but also more fixed. In doing so, the work can become secondary to its description.

17. The speed of publication has begun to outpace the time required for thought. Writing is often produced within compressed timeframes, leaving limited space for hesitation, doubt, or reconsideration.

18. From the first time I learned to read and write about art, I was told that criticism was in crisis, a statement that seemed opaque. Walter Benjamin, in The Author as Producer, insists that writing must intervene in its conditions, that form and politics are inseparable. This demand remains, though often only faintly, in the background of contemporary writing.

19. Hal Foster describes the critic as an endangered figure, while Rosalind Krauss writes of a field in which boundaries expand and meanings disperse. These positions begin to align with the current condition of writing: dispersed, continuous, and frequently detached from necessity.

20. The crisis has yet to arrive because it has not yet taken on a recognisable form. It exists instead as a condition, difficult to isolate, more sensed than clearly articulated.

21. I write about art in order to complicate my own understanding of it, and of my own politics. Writing does not necessarily clarify; instead, it extends uncertainty, allowing contradictions to remain active rather than resolved…am I repeating myself here?

Owed to Survivance [Tran]Script [An Excerpt]

Hannah Catherine Jones

This text is designed to be listened to rather than read. I provide this written text for reference. [1]

Owed to Survivance was broadcast on NTS Radio in July 2020 and can be accessed via this web address:
https://www.nts.live/shows/the-opera-show/episodes/the-opera-show-7th-july-2020

Dr. Hannah Catherine Jones is a London-based, Yorkshire-born, Bajan-diasporic multi-hyphenated artist and musician.

…Where did operatic form originate? There are theories that the western tradition of opera was significantly influenced by colonisers witnessing, and potentially even participating in, pre-colonial African performative rituals which incorporated song, dance, costume and community.

Descriptions of these experiences then disseminated amongst the upper classes in Europe and inspired the imaginations of western composers.[2] There exists very little documentation due to the intangible nature of oral traditions and the overwhelming theft and reframing, and destruction, of indigenous artworks of all mediums by the European colonisers.[3]

From the banning of drumming in plantations, the work song, or negro spiritual evolved, cast-off instruments from the North American military (post-World War I) birthed jazz, and from the apartheid and disempowerment of native South Africans, the toyi-toyi was conceived. Improvisation as a response to disempowerment is an intrinsic survivance methodology of blackness.

The toyi-toyi is high-intensity dance which essentially employs the body as a percussive instrument, the performer jumps with high knees from one foot to the other, whilst simultaneously singing or chanting the communal call and response. And although the toyi-toyi is generally associated with South Africa, it was actually invented by Zimbabwean freedom fighters to maintain both morale and fitness whilst fighting the Rhodesian army and was introduced into South Africa via the border by guerrilla training camps. [4]

By the 1980s, civilians were utilising toyi-toyi in protest - a sonic representation of survivance, a song-dance that itself functions as a weapon of sound in moments of civil disobedience, both historical and contemporary.

Chicago Children's Choir - Toyi Toyi - Open Up Your Heart - Chicago - 2006 [5]

Standing the test of time, that was the Chicago Children's choir performing the toyi-toyi in a recording from 2006. The fight to be recognised by the institution (governments, educational institutions and so on), as a non-European is ongoing. To enter into the academic canon, to gain and maintain a place in the discourse of any given field, is often met with resistance from those in power. Despite producing an extensive body of compositional and performative work, including pioneering combinations of minimalism and post-minimalism with pop music and operating within the same artistic circles as John Cage and Arthur Russel, Julius Eastman died penniless, homeless and alone in Tompkins Square Park, New York, in 1990.[6]

Since the London Contemporary Music Festival curated a 3-day event, 'In Search of Julius Eastman', in December 2016, there has been an influx of interest, including The Otolith Group's 2017 film The Third Part of the Third Measure, and I was fortunate enough to view the work at its premiere at Goldsmiths at the 'Images of Tomorrow Anti-Conference' (shoutout to Ama and Xana), and at Corsica Studios' Hyperdub event (shoutout to Shannen), so finally, this artist is entering the canon.

Julius Eastman - Stay On It - Unjust Malaise - New York - 1973[7]

Julius Eastman - Evil N***[8] **- Unjust Malaise - New York 1979**[9]

You are hearing a combination of Eastman's 'Evil N*****' from 1979 and 'Stay On It' from 1973, an intentional blending to remind us of the very real existence of systemic and institutional racism, and the importance of perseverance, of keeping on it, of survivance, that comes with self-expression. Eastman, Price, Armstrong, Ellis, have all endured suffering and throughout this produced joyful art, paving the way for us to have the privilege to critique our current circumstances as black diasporic subjects in 2018.

Despite this, the fight to gain recognition as a human being, is historically linked to the production of art. Phillis Wheatley was forced to recite her poetry in a Boston courtroom in 1772, essentially to prove her humanity through her art, in response to the general disbelief that an enslaved woman was capable of producing excellent prose. …

[1] *Owed to Survivance* was originally produced, submitted and examined for the DPhil Transfer Exam at Ruskin School of Art, University of Oxford in January 2018 with these instructions. Ideally, the work should be listened to through stereo speakers or headphones. To begin the examination, I performed a version of *Voàra* in which I duetted live vocal improvisations with the recording, whilst live-streaming via Facebook.

[2] Lokangaka Losambe and Dvei Sarinjeive, ed., Pre-colonial and Post-colonial Drama and *Theatre in Africa*, New Africa Books (Pty) Ltd., South Africa, 2001, p.viii.

[3] Jonathan Jones, '*The art world's shame: why Britain must give its colonial booty back*', The Guardian, [website],

[4] Amandla! A Revolution in Four Part Harmony [film], dir. Lee Hirsch, ATO Pictures, 2003.

[5] *Toyi Toyi*, [video], Chicago Children's Choir - Topic, YouTube, January 18th July 2014, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TZ4VU5Rf2Dc, accessed 9th October 2018.

[6] Hilton Als, '*The Genius and the Tragedy of Julius Eastman*', The New Yorker, [website], https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2018/01/22/the-genius-and-the-tragedy-of-julius-eastman, accessed 17th October 2018.

[7] *Julius Eastman: Stay on It* (1973), [video], Wellesz Theatre, YouTube, 11th February 2011, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9X3j_76VBvI&t=367s, accessed 9th October 2018.

[8] I chose to censor this word/sign within *Owed to Survivance* in order to deny the possibility of any white/white-passing tutors/examiners speaking it, which was a very real concern at the time of submission and examination in 2018 - Hannah Catherine Jones 2021.

[9] Julius Eastman: Evil Nigger (1979) 1/2, [video], TheWellesz Company, YouTube, 23rd April 2012, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6_QGQcKq1ik, accessed 9th October 2018.

[10] Vincent Carretta, ed., Complete Writings: Phillis Wheatley, Penguin Books, London, 2001, p.ix.

The visitor, the octopus.

Lucy Grubb

This text is a series of thoughts, avenues, and feelings wandering around, and again the group exhibition The Hole in the Whole at Eastside Projects.

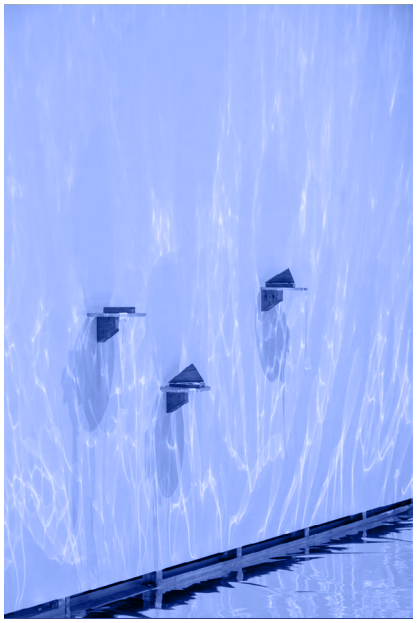
The Hole in the Whole is curated by Harmanpreet Randhawa.

With work by Ashkan Sepavand, Phoebe Collings-James, and Valerie Asiimwe Amani.

Eastside Projects, Birmingham, 4 Oct – 6 Dec 2025.

Valerie Asiimwe Amani, *You conjure*, 2025. Courtesy of the artist and Eastside Projects. Photo: Ashley Carr.

Lucy Grubb is an artist-curator based in Coventry.



Valerie Asiimwe Amani, *To dismantle a house II* (detail), 2025. Courtesy of the artist and Eastside Projects. Photo: Ashley Carr.

I am thinking of you
and the octopus
and the silver water
and the wetness
folding over itself

you pause
I pause

the soft hesitation of your mouth
the salt on your skin
the way the light bends around you
the way I cannot tell
where you end
and where the water begins

limbs folding
curling
pressing
sliding
a foot of desire
I cannot hold
cannot contain
cannot name

sometimes I think
the earth remembers us
before we do
dirt, sediment, wet floors
holding impossible shapes
that fold into each other
fold us into each other

I have eight ways of saying no
and still the body says yes

and the octopus moves
each limb a small language
our tongues writing in salt
teaching me to follow
teaching me to dissolve
teaching me to fold
teaching me to foldover

I reach

and the water reaches
and the visitor reaches
and the light trembles
and the sediment undulates
and we fold
and we fold
and we fold

sometimes I wonder
am I following you
or are you following me
or is it the room
or the salt
or the suspended lightshade
or the wet
or the impossible
that carries us

we dance sideways
we dance backwards
we pulse
we jerk
we slip
we fold into limb
into light
into wet
into sediment
into impossible dreams

I do not know where you end
and I begin
or if I begin at all
or if it is all octopus
all water
all suspended light
that moves through us
that folds us
that teaches us

and I want to say
I want to trace it
to outline it
but the words dissolve
so I let my body remember
so I let the limbs fold
so I let the visitor fold into me
and I fold into the octopus
and I fold into the impossible

and I wanted you to know

Ashkan Sepahvand, *Hellishes on Earth* (detail), 2025.Courtesy of the artist and Eastside Projects. Photo: Ashley Carr.

The Hole in the Whole, Installation view, 2025. Courtesy of the artists and Eastside Projects. Photo: Ashley Carr.

Review: Suzanne Treister, Modern Art Oxford

Sunil Shah

Sunil Shah is an artist, writer and PhD researcher based in Oxford.

A little background awareness coupled with a mild sense of intuition formed a compelling desire to see Suzanne Treister's exhibition, *Prophetic Dreaming*, at Modern Art Oxford. I vaguely knew that Treister's work addressed arcade computer games and histories associated with the Internet. It is a subject matter close to me - having been brought up before computers were around, witnessed in wonderment their rise and growth, played arcade games and once been addicted to Nintendo. I later learned from and used computers and IT to earn money, I became an avid online presence and like us all, an unintentional digital consumer. Over the past decade, like many of us, I have become increasingly disturbed by the Internet's hold on us and its use as a control mechanism. My presence continually subject to digital profiling for ads and information the algorithms decide I need to receive. I am troubled by its impact on humanity, frightened by its potential for segregating people and fuelling hate as the most powerful political tool ever made. As a result, I am terrified by the prospect of what the future might hold. I hoped Suzanne Treister had something to offer me. If nothing else, just reassurance of my paranoia.

The exhibition takes on a chronological arrangement. Treister's early paintings merge motifs of modern technology into the familiar tableaux and subject matter of history painting, art historical references and text creating mystical and surreal montage-like arrangements. Her use of the television in particular stood out to me as a portal into other worlds and objects from daily life in their isolated placement, symbols pertaining to the subconscious dreamworlds she builds. These paintings indicate a clear interest in what comes later in her work: the potential for projecting imagined realms, across different times, the past, present and future sometimes coexisting within a work. It was her discovery of arcade games that signalled a radical departure from painting towards new media. Arcade games in the 1980's and early 1990's were simple in their logic by today's standards, but what was integral to them was the creation of a world, or other worlds - fantastical, magical and derived from sci-fi, the supernatural or mythology – all of which she was already invested in. These "worlds" are sometimes projected through imagined arcade game stills generated

through Commodore Amiga's *Deluxe Paint II* as photographic screen shots or as imagined software application boxes with 3.5" floppy disks and in later work linked to the past, via video, by Treister's alter ego, *Rosalind Brodsky*. What is common to all the work up until this stage is some form of time travel, taking both Treister and the viewer into a journey of sorts, whether it is a game, fictional research projects or video performances featuring Brodsky.

Indeed, research plays a significant part in Treister's work particularly after the late 2000's when disillusionment set in once the utopian world of pre-Web 2.0 gave way to the shape of what we understand as the Internet today. Content discovery is replaced by content delivery and naturally, the Internet becomes fully realised as the quintessential platform for identity profiling, marketing and capital accumulation. This was a bitter pill to swallow for anyone who was genuinely excited by the prospect of what the Internet first promised; open source, community, information sharing and networking delivered through rapid technology. For Treister this became the impetus for discarding technology as an artist production tool and returning back to something more grounded in work made by hand. However, part of her reaction was to understand the origins of the Internet and those who contributed to its existence and how its creation was linked to other counter cultural movements and developments such as Cybernetics, contributing and shaping the Internet, inadvertently or deliberately, as a cybernetic feedback loop. Treister began mapping these people and histories in order to understand where power and knowledge reside. Huge illustrations resembling alchemical drawings connected streams of thought and patterns which colluded to the Internet's birth and technological progress. This blending of the past and future typifies Treister's approach as a lens which allows one to step outside the logic and aesthetics of present-day modern technology tools almost as if someone from the past is looking into a crystal ball future in search of a spiritual understanding of the internet age.

This clairvoyance forms the basis of the *Hexen 2.0* (and *later Hexen 5.0*) series where a tarot deck is produced projecting the previously researched histories onto tarot archetypes. Instead of personal divination, the tarot cards are intended for use as a game where groups of players can reflect or discuss the past, present and futures of global predicaments through the delivery of a hand of cards. Each group and cards dealt are likely to inform different conversations and hence, the potential for different solutions or ways of dealing with our collective crises. *Hexen 5.0* is an updated version of the deck which incorporates more recent developments in our history such as AI, blockchain, climate crisis etc. Treister's latest works embrace the evolution of technology but also newer counter cultural movements and thinking continuing the integration of scientific and spiritual ideas as new ways of applying cybernetics to climate challenges and newly formed disciplines which embrace holistic thinking.

Treister's bodies of work in this retrospective demand close attention and a detailed analysis, which is not possible here. Later works incorporate a commission at CERN, AI and imagined institutions amongst so much more. I urge a visit to her website, which constitutes her expanding archive helping inspire this exhibition and where a visitor can engage with all of Treister's works. This generosity and openness to sharing and speaking about her work (Treister can be found contributing to several talks online), in addition to series like *Hexen* which encourage direct participation make this practice committed to educating in counter-cultural histories, offering the possibility to respond to the paralysis we find ourselves in beholden to power and control. Our desperate circumstances under this "technofeudalism" require us to understand and think through all our possible, potential futures.

Review:

Mediacity Seoul Biennale

Jason Waite

Jason Waite is editor of Art Review Oxford.

Perhaps the first biennale where the star of the show is the carpet. Mediacity Seoul Biennale continues to be one of the most important biennales in Asia, with its 13th edition curated by Anton Vidokle, Hallie Ayres, and Lukas Brasiskis. Entitled *Séance: Technology of the Spirit* the show looks at the interplay of spirituality and modernity within a more concentrated geography than in the past focusing on just three sites the Seoul Museum of Art, Nakhon Sangga (a 1960s modernist multi-purpose building that includes a mall of musical instruments) and Cinematheque Seoul Art Cinema for the film program.

This synthesis of space allowed for a more in-depth development of the exhibition space across the sprawling Seoul Museum of Art for example building out a maze of Rudolf Steiner blackboards in the museum foyer to prepare one mentally and perhaps spiritually for the show. Unlike other recent biennales, such as the 60th Venice Biennale and Aichi Triennale 2025, that have moved toward materiality away from moving image, the curators of the 13th Mediacity Seoul had no hesitation about the medium. The curators commissioned new large-scale video projects—including some of the most compelling works in the show—by Jane Jin Kaisen, Hiwa K, Kivu Ruhorahoza and Christian Nyampeta.
Ranging into history the show introduced Georgiana Houghton the British equivalent of Hilma af Klimt (who was also included in the exhibition), the 19th century spiritual medium whose abstract watercolours with flowing lines and chromatically suffuse, pre-dated Wassily Kandinsky's abstract turn by half a century. Nearby in the main exhibition space,a long dining room table set with cosmotechic tarot cards created by Suzanne Triester included a range of historical and contemporary thinkers and writers such as Isaac Asimov, Donna Harraowy, and Yuk Hui.

However the centrepiece of the exhibition was the polychromatic scenography by the architectural firm COLLECTIVE. The exhibition space functions as an immersive muted rainbow of colours from the walls to the carpets. In the Color Manifesto written by the group and the curators, where they underscore that "color is the structure. It doesn't not frame the exhibition: it constitutes it. In this exhibition, color is what connects works, defines space, marks transitions, and produces meaning. It's not applied: it's integral."[1] The soft colour wraps the exhibition space and insulates the viewer inside a beautifully well constructed and thoughtful space.

Jane Jin Kaisen, *Dokkaebi*, single-channel film, 3 minutes 24 seconds, 2024.

Yet it can be hard to reconcile some of the exhibition's aspirations with the highly produced space. For example, one of the major sections focuses on the importance of water and asks what happens when water "passes from one state to another, and at what cost?" Reading that text while standing on the part of the almost 3,500 square meter of intensively dyed carpet—a water intensive-process—it is difficult to avoid the cost that one is looking at. This gap between theory and practice in parts of the exhibition could be summed up through the dark humour of Hyung-Min Yoon Black Book (*Slideshow*) that included the sardonic joke:

"What is the latest plan for the Gulf oil spill? Drive SUVs. It'll melt the polar ice caps and dilute the spill."

Mulling over this inherent tension in the biennale, I exited the soft confines of the museum and heard the echos of an ongoing protest near the city hall offices around the corner. In a city famous for its multitude of protests and social movements, those voices calling for change had not filtered into the show as the colourful carpet muted the sound of city outside the museum.

[1] Anton Vidokle, Hallie Ayres, Lukas Brasiskis, Sanna Almajedi, Ben Eastham, nonplace studio, and COLLECTIVE, "Color Manifesto," in *13th Seoul Mediacity Biennale, Séance: Technology of the Spirit*, Seoul Museum of Art, 2025: 38.

Review: Shu Lea Cheang Haus der Kunst, Munich

Jenny W. Tang

Around a projection of flowing red blood cells, a flickering pair of bright red neon lips shines '*KISS KISS, KILL KILL*' on you. You climb up a flight of spiraling stairs, and you enter a trashscape with meat, machines, and mushrooms, as alive as they are abject. *KI$$ KI$$*, the first institutional survey exhibition by the 2024 LG Guggenheim Awardee Shu Lea Cheang (b. 1954, Tainan, Taiwan), curated by Sarah Johanna Theurer with Laila Wu, opened on 14 February 2025 at Munich's Haus der Kunst. While marketed as a retrospective solo show, Cheang emphasised that all works were created anew, collaboratively. "I don't even have a studio!" she exclaimed humorously. *KI$$ KI$$* asks what kinds of relations we really want with the things—food, technology, sex, and data—we desire. Rather than the cruel optimism of progressive or romantic promises, Cheang confronts you with the carnality of the capitalocene.[1] *KI$$ KI$$* brings you into an interactive theatre of play where your flesh is as much an unruly vector in the gallery as the meat, machines, and mushrooms in the actor-network of the exhibition.[2] [3]

The first gallery features an expanded installation titled *Home Delivery* (2025). Nine sheep skulls, remains from eaten sheep heads, rest on a round table in the centre of the room. Around the table, robots carry kraft takeaway food boxes from a distribution station through pre-mapped routes around the room, while releasing manufactured scents of a *plat du jour*—a different olfactory menu each day. The human viewer-actant must make way for the robots-on-duty. The murmuring of sheep is heard from afar, broadcasted by the Sheep Radio.[4] On the edges of the room are dumps of discarded kraft boxes, transported by wandering robots. These boxes index the abundant food wastes created by contemporary food delivery systems. "The urban landscape is abstracted to the charting of (defunct) food delivery routes which mobilise a global culture of migrants and refugees […]. They are striving on the edges at the centre of the world, only to be soon replaced by robots wandering on the loose," Cheang explains. In Cheang's mise-en-scène, technology operates simultaneously as the infrastructure for creativity and a potential threat to the human, literally.

The centrepiece in the room, Cheang's re-creation of *Eating Sheep's Head* (2005) by Yondonjunai Dalkh-Ochir and the Blue Sun Contemporary Art Center of Mongolia, highlights the animals and ecologies rendered invisible in contemporary foodscapes. Cheang invited Blue Sun artists to travel from Ulaanbaatar to Munich to perform at her exhibition opening. Originally staged in Ulaanbaatar, fifteen years after the end of state

socialism, *Eating Sheep's Head* sought to redirect attention from Socialist aesthetic formalism to felt human-nature intimacy, understood as quintessential to the Mongol way of being.[5] Restaged in Munich with locally prepared sheep, Cheang extended the performance with the first public performance of *We Ate a Sheep* (2023), a song she wrote during her travels in the Mongolian countryside.[6] For the people of Ulaanbaatar, even though they have now moved from a pastoral lifestyle to living in a city clouded by toxic pollutants of capitalist extraction, the cosmological belief of human-nature mutuality remains at the core of a treasured 'nomadic mentality' (*nüüdelchdiin setgelgee*). 'We eat a sheep. A sheep is born. *We are the sheep*,' Cheang's song finishes. We Ate a Sheep was performed in two iterations, featuring male and female voices respectively. Rather than imposing her gender values upon her collaborators, Cheang made time and space for a multiplicity of values to flourish.

Such off-binary gender critique-in-praxis continues through *Spoken Words* (2025) in the second gallery. A large AI self-portrait—Cheang's 'invented off-binary self of no fixed definition'—*Uttering* (2023) greets you, the viewer-actant, with a figure with changing skin colour who sequentially sucks on a dummy and a ball gag. This sexually and ethnically queer figure can be any of us. The mutability of its visual form and the projected carnal desires gesture towards an anti-essentialist common humanity based a 'nomadic subjectivity' in Rosi Braidotti's terms.[7] A large pipe installed on the ceiling transports e-trash from the installation of networked touch screens made of obsolete keyboards to a dump of electronic trash, composed of disposed broken keyboards. You, the viewer-actant, can press on these keyboards to generate 'syncopated tunes and tones of bygone tomorrows'.[8] The dump of e-trash resonates with the dump of food boxes in the first room. Then kraft, now plastic and metallic: lithium, cadmium, beryllium, and ever more toxic. These monotone heaps of trash, just about getting in your way as you swerve through other visitors and installations, enact an inescapable trashscape.

Finally, following vivid sounds of wreckage in *RMtract* (2025), performed by Martin Howse with sensors and software giving voice to a cart of mushroom mycelia, one arrives at *Portal Porting* (2025). In the middle of a long rectangular gallery lit with a cold florescent white light, a burnt and graffitied car lies in the ruins of fallen branches where mushrooms have grown. Long stretches of white walls on two sides of the gallery project *Composting the Net* (2012). Here, trash turns digital. Physically more distant from the viewer-

actant in space, unending streams of data trash flow continuously on enormous screens too tall and wide for you to touch. Precisely, risks posed by the digital, cyber, data, and machines might seem immaterial, but they intrude and destruct lifeworlds materially. Yet, Cheang's falling debris of obsolete data, visualised as shattering alphabets from archived mailing lists, also 'cultivates a field of fresh sprouts that crack through the compost-enriched virtual soil'.[9] For Cheang, we live in the 'post-crash era' where technology, ecology, and politics are interdependently critical for the vitality of human and other life forms. Creative responses to the brutality of contemporary technopolitics frequently fall short on critical rigour, but what Cheang presents is a sophisticated reflection on decades of engagement with an ever more cunning 'net'. Whether analogue or digital, trash is not a 'dead end' but the ruins where mutations emerge.

'Could there still be time enough to build a civic infrastructure for virtual teleportation, one that breaks with the discriminatory and opaque nature of locked doors, hidden surveillance, privacy breaches and concealed discrimination?' Theurer, the Curator, asks.[10] Cheang answers with a ninety-metre stretched techno-organic network where life thrives through the cracks. You are invited to a shared, inescapable human challenge to persist in living an inevitably perishable life, while holding on, making kin, and clamouring for kisses and vitality, despite ongoing atrocities against humanity and ecologies. *KI$$ KI$$* is a multi-sensorial provocation that shakes one's body-mind to reimagine our shared being in this world. You will not romanticise your desires this Valentine's Day.

[1] Lauren Berlant describes that '[a] relation of cruel optimism exists when something you desire is actually an obstacle to your flourishing'; see Lauren Berlant, *Cruel Optimism* (Duke University Press, 2011). See 'capitalocene' in Donna Haraway, 'Anthropocene, Capitalocene, Plantationocene, Chthulucene: Making Kin', *Environmental Humanities* 6, no. 1 (1 May 2015): 159–65; Christian Parenti and Jason W. Moore, eds., *Anthropocene or Capitalocene?* Nature, History, and the Crisis of Capitalism, Kairos (PM Press, 2016).

[2] Elizabeth Povinelli describes 'carnality' as 'the socially built space between flesh and environment', and 'flesh', as much as it is subjected to the biopolitics of corporeal governance, is also 'an independent, unruly vector at play within these biopolitics'; see Elizabeth A Povinelli, *The Empire of Love: Toward a Theory of Intimacy, Genealogy, and Carnality* (Duke University Press, 2006), p.7.

[3] The 'actor-network' here refers to Bruno Latour's actor-network theory; see Bruno Latour, *Reassembling the Social: An Introduction to Actor-Network-Theory* (Oxford University Press, 2005).

[4] The 'actant' here refers to Latour's more-than-human things that 'modify a state of affairs by making a difference'; see ibid.

[5] Annu Wilenius, Saara Hacklin, and Vesa Vehviläinen, *Mongolia: Perception and Utopia* (Kerava Art Museum, 2008).

[6] *We Ate a Sheep* (2023) was created during the *Lost Rivers – Sound, Motion, Vision 10-Day Lab* curated by Gantuya Badamgarav in Mongolia, July 2023.

[7] Braidotti defines the 'nomadic subjectivity' as the 'transversal subjectivities' that resists 'fixed and essentialized cultural or national identities'; see Rosi Braidotti, 'Nomadism: Against Methodological Nationalism', *Policy Futures in Education* 8, no. 3–4 (2010): 408–418. Étienne Balibar describes a comparable idea with the notion of 'ontological difference', as that which is always differing from itself; see Étienne Balibar, 'Ontological Difference, Anthropological Difference, and Equal Liberty', *European Journal of Philosophy* 28, no. 1 (March 2020): 3–14.

[8] Shu Lea Cheang, *Kiss Kiss Kill Kill* (Mousse Publishing, 2025), p.65.

[9] Shu Lea Cheang, 'Composting the Net', 2012, website. Available at: <https://www.compostingthenet.net/index.php?mod=main>, accessed 23 May 2025.

[10] Cheang, *Kiss Kiss Kill Kill*, p.71.

Review:

Beatriz González, The Barbican, London

Alejandro Soto-Chaves

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When some claim that Latin Americans can blissfully dance until 3 a.m. on a night out to songs in which a prisoner pleads for his life as it slips away in a cell—or to a tune in which a streetwalker and a panderer stab each other to death in a dimly lit NYC street—it is easy to dismiss this as macabre stereotyping. Yet the cliché contains a dosage of truth. Beatriz González's first UK retrospective—co-produced with the Pinacoteca de São Paulo and Astrup Fearnley Museet—stages what she has termed the "joy of underdevelopment": a dazzlingly colourful body of work in which playfulness coexists with extreme violence, set against the Barbican's coffered ceilings and pick-hammered concrete.

The exhibition brings together over 150 works from González's six-decade career, tracing her key obsessions and theoretical concerns. Curator Lotte Johnson arranges these chronologically, interweaving *La Maestra*'s exploration of Flemish and Spanish Baroque, Abstract Expressionism or Pop Art, with her scrutiny of *La Violencia*, the media coverage of tragedy (*páginas rojas*), and her very own take on culture's democratisation.

González's love for images unfolded through accretion and residue. What might appear as a reinterpretation via a modern language was, rather, an insistence on the image—whether *apocalittici* or *integrati*—as the cornerstone from which she produced new imaginaries. Throughout the exhibition, the image emerges as her central object of fascination: a synthesis of technical practice, societal awareness, and, crucially, archival work, privileging the artist's gaze over the constraints of journalistic or historical methodologies. This is expressed through the interplay between exhibition spaces showing paintings, furniture, tapestry, wallpaper and installations, and vitrines in the balcony walkways displaying her archive—photographs, clippings, religious stamps, postcards—which informed the works in adjoining galleries.

Beatriz González cherished the process as if she were a process artist, without succumbing to transitory materials or canonical finish—*the finish of the unfinished*, if you will. What mattered was the infinite replicability of the source image, its capacity to traverse media and genre (from portraiture to installation, installation to furniture, furniture to still life, still life to *naturaleza viva*, though mistranslated as *Still Life II*).

González might have been a Pop artist, despite her firm refusal of the label, if one accepts—rather absurdly—that Pop Art holds a monopoly over silkscreen as a technique. She could equally be cast as an appropriation artist—Pop, New Realist, even a *southern* member of the Pictures Generation—if the *amount* and *substantiality* of her reworkings satisfied such thresholds. Would that constitute a *fair use* of such labels? González was, nonetheless, all and none. As a Latin American artist, her work drew on a repertoire that exceeded these categories by context: religious imagery, colonial baroque, a distinct media environment (*i.e.* telenovelas, tabloid rhetoric, mediated relations to Euro-American celebrity culture), and syncretic iconographies.

González intercalated humour, satire, and irony with Colombia's protracted conflict—between state forces, paramilitaries, guerrillas, and cartels—even as her work turned more sombre, in step with a period whose unutterable reality came to claim a capital V—*La Violencia*. The exhibition pinpoints this shift in works that address isolated tragedies, such as the *Sisga dam* incident, or entrenched societal issues like macho culture. Laughter becomes a critique of power: press imagery and political figures compressed into estranged caricature; memory, its fixative through obsessive repetition. This returns to the condition defined at the outset: a non-sombre mode of coping with what history has made of the region's most vulnerable populations—*a refuge*. González's blur, flattening, shifts in palette, engrain scorn into displacement, death and disappearance (which, in Latin America, resist

synonymy), catastrophe, and the remnants of colonialism, extending even to the manufacture of taste. Can a grotesque crime—a femicide—be rendered in good taste? Composure, in her work, does not signal optimism. Look closer: the subject is not asleep. Red is everywhere.

If González's work repels formal commitment, it is equally resistant to the hierarchies of taste that frame it. Readings that attribute her understanding of European and North American art to the "poor quality" of reproductions available in Colombia take us back to that question. The alleged deficiency of her sources and the "bad taste" of her work are embedded in Latin America's visual ecosystems and vocabularies. A faded, tone-altered reproduction of Murillo's *La Inmaculada Concepción de los Venerables* (1678), Rubens' *Assumption of the Virgin* (1626), or a crucifixion by Zurbarán—hung on a living room wall or pinned to a grandmother's fridge—can carry more symbolic and devotional weight than its "original" preserved in a museum or church thousands of miles away. To recall Benjamin, the original's presence—its parasitical dependence on ritual—ceases to be imperative. In fact, for *grandma*, it never was.

González—like Botero, whom she frequently summoned—grasped this dynamic. Her furniture interventions, thoughtfully arranged throughout the exhibition, fuse the refined silhouettes of modern design with traditional Colombian woodcraft, pairing the expectation of polished woodgrain with its kitsch double: painted surfaces that imitate woodgrain while subtly undermining the very premise of *trompe-l'œil*. Found objects—coat racks, beds, tables, baskets—carry portraits of icons and canonical images, from JFK to Jesus, Bolívar, la *Gioconda*, or Millet's *Angelus* (1857–59). Beyond Dalí's fixations, what awareness sustains the dismissal of the reproductions González studied as "poor quality", in light of what an *Angelus* lithograph means to an ordinary Catholic Latin American aunt? Placed beside a coiled telephone cord (perhaps like the one García Márquez's María desperately

needed in his 1992 *I Only Came to Use the Phone*), an old Singer sewing machine, and a *minicomponente*, it belongs to a domestic interior marked by horror vacui. Piety does not heed the names of famous painters. Gruzinski's *guerre des images* in a nutshell: the triumph of a Cardinal's postcard turned bedside table. González locates the universal in the local by tropicalising the European canon—an operation that, however necessary within Latin America's long process of emancipation, remains entangled in its logic.

Among the exhibition's most striking works is *Mr President*, *What an Honour to Be With You at This Historic Moment* (1987). Here, González depicted Belisario Betancur as a smiling, ominous figure alongside his ministers/generals, rendered elsewhere as red parrots, gathered in a situation room, with a charred body laid out before them. The painting responds to the M-19 siege of the Palace of Justice and the government's decision to storm the building, triggering a fire that killed around 100 people. What registers is a broader condition: a form of power for which civilian life remains expendable. The exhibition's wall texts, invoking Gabo, gesture towards this—articulated in his 1979 short story *Bon Voyage*, *Mr President*, where an ageing, ill, exiled president reads his survival as a providential sign to return and restore his country:

The President sighed. 'That's how we are, and nothing can save us,' he said. 'A continent conceived by the scum of the earth without a moment of love: the children of abductions, rapes, violations, infamous dealings, deceptions, the union of enemies with enemies (…)' Mixing the races means mixing tears with spilt blood. What can one expect from such a potion?'

González drank that potion. She made cocktails out of it—cursi ones. The Barbican retrospective stands as a testament to her deed. In the end, contrary to what she stated, there is indeed *something* left but death: *El silencio* (1997).