

A

ADVENTURES IN THE POST-MEDIUM CONDITION

THROUGH THE 55TH
VENICE BIENNALE WITH A QUESTION,
A THEORY AND A PAIR OF UMBRELLAS

TEXT — Jeni Fulton with Hili Perlson



Above
BEDWYR WILLIAMS
The Starry Messenger
(installation), 2013

HD Film, 15 min, bespoke bleachers,
cordless headphones, media player

Below
The Northern Hemisphere, 2013

Steel frame, painted plywood, acrylic top,
household items
347 x 280 x 447 cm
Both images courtesy the artist,
Oriol Davies, MOSTYN, Ceri Hand
Gallery, London
Commissioned by Arts Council of Wales
Photos: Anna Arca



EVERYTHING, EVERYTHING

On a cold Thursday afternoon in late May, we were standing in a darkened chapel of a former convent in the middle of Venice during the press preview of the 2013 Biennale, and the eerie sound of a man sobbing was reverberating around the room. A tiny, home-made observatory featured an array of telescopes, offering evidence of a very particular obsession. There was a water feature with oversized marble chips emitting an eerie blue glow, and ahead, an oversized glass table covered with 120 objects ranging from irons to clothes airers. This was the work of Bedwyr Williams for the Welsh pavilion, entitled “The Starry Messenger”. The piece is at once an homage to amateur astronomers and to terrazzo, the building material which the chapel is covered in. Williams’ main motive is to “explore the relationships between stargazing and the home, the cosmos, and the role of the amateur in a professional world,” using this panoply of disparate elements.

“The Starry Messenger” also comprises a video featuring the adventures of a dentist, sound installations, a janitor’s room, and the aforementioned giant table and hotel foyer water feature. Terrazzo-patterned canvasses cover the walls and the material is picked up as a theme in both the video piece and the installations. The terrazzo is an extension of the astronomy theme because, for Williams, it is symbolic of our size in relation to the galaxy: we are the “tiny specks”, the chips of quartz and glass that the composite material is made from.

The key video piece, made in collaboration with two video-makers from Cardiff, is a film about a dentist from a mosaic mural becoming animate, and then narrated by someone (it wasn’t clear whether by the dentist himself or a bystander). The point of view of the narrator in the video switches between patients and psyche, childhood trauma and memories. Stone again plays a key role, with particles, flecks, chunks and slivers, grinding and fusing together. Shots of saliva running down a dominatrix’s thigh-high boot are followed by views of an aspic terrine on a child’s plate: a wall is demolished and out of its parts, the ubiquitous terrazzo is remade. The dentist is crushed among piles of stones, and floats free in space. Shots of craftsmen cutting Venetian mosaic tiles are followed by shots of teeth being drilled, and the entire effect is one of a psychedelic trip gone awry, in full HD. What did it all mean?

This year, something was going on at the Venice Biennale among its younger participants, a group who are weaving together works pulled from all different types of media, whether sound, video, photography, sculpture or installation, to form a

narrative, focusing on the artists' particular obsessions (which included space and size, memory, and above all, the role of the individual and the value of subjectivity). Part of this was the challenge for young artists to operate in the dated environs of the national pavilions – for instance, the artist Alfredo Jaar, representing the Chilean pavilion, eloquently expressed his distaste for this mode of presentation by submerging a scale Giardini model into the murky depths of a pool filled with Venetian water every three minutes.

“The architecture... is very dominant,” said Israeli artist Gilad Ratman when we chatted with him. “It was also not designed for contemporary art. It was envisaged for exhibiting paintings and drawings, maybe photography. So how to work with this? My intuition was to work with the pavilion, not to resist its architecture, but to counter it with the content of the work.”

Ratman was investigating subjectivity and using a cast of non-actors and amalgamations of media to create a micro-universe in the Israeli pavilion. Other artists working with national pavilions were producing similar amalgamations, and they were replying to the question posed by Biennale curator Massimiliano Gioni in the main pavilions: “What does it mean if we are all media, and the brain is the first medium?”

While previous generations answered that by paintings and sculptures inspired by spiritism (Hilma af Klint, for example) and occultism, this generation of younger artists is creating micro-universes dedicated to exploring personal narrative and subjective readings of experience, formed by mix-and-match clusters of sound art, installation and video. None of these artists tie themselves to a particular medium: for instance, Bedwyr Williams is a “videographer, sound artist, sculptor and comedian”; Ratman has worked with “installations, sound, sculpture, painting, everything.”

The more we looked in Venice, the more we found: in Ryan Trecartin's installative videos, in Helen Marten's installations, in Eva Kotatkova's interactive installations produced with the help of psychiatric patients in a Prague asylum – in short, everywhere where the work refused to be pinned down, to be reduced to a singular interpretation or medium. Each component couldn't be viewed individually, but asked to be read inside the larger context of the presentation. Each element is a commentary on the whole, but also on itself. This allows a subjective reality to enter the work, and the subtlety of individual impressions to be reflected in the piece, and our apprehension of it.

Is this what they call “the post-medium condition”? And if so, what are the conditions of that condition? We wandered on, in search of the right questions to ask.

AFTER THE ARTIST

In the Israeli pavilion Ratman's piece, “The Workshop”, centres around a video documenting the underground journey of a group of people – artists, a climber, an acrobat and musicians – who enter a cave system in the Carmel mountains in Israel, and are searching for an object not immediately apparent to the viewer, which turns out to be water, Ratman's metaphor for Venice. Drilling in the caves, they eventually complete their journey, emerging through a crack into the Israeli pavilion.

Ratman, who wasn't heading the workshop himself, told the instructor to work with the group on making a self-portrait of clay, insert a microphone anywhere they wanted in the sculpture, and communicate with their clay figures using non-verbal aural communication. The resulting cacophony was mixed live by the Israeli DJ Oz Malul. The process was deliberately open-ended, with Ratman leaving many elements uncontrollable: the sound of the voices, the look of the sculpted heads. The script was explicit but the constitutive elements were left to chance, to be discovered in the process, negating the central role of the artist as director/manager and centering the piece on the participant/visitor experience, thus removing the artist from the equation. One condition of the post-medium condition is, very much, the death of the artist his- or herself.

Ratman wanted to overcome the limitation of the linearity of his central video piece by building the other works in the pavilion around it, the architecture acting as an extension of the video itself, by taking the visitor on a journey similar to that undertaken by the actors. The visitor enters, is confronted with the first soundscape and video, which shows the DJ in the same spot where the viewer is now standing – in front of a hole in the pavilion's floor. The viewer then mounts the stairs to the mezzanine where the clay heads are installed as a central piece, while a video of the group's journey in the cave and another one, on the upper level, of the workshop are projected. When descending again, the dénouement is complete. Returning to the same spot in a circular movement is rewarded; the pavilion's architecture is central to the experience.

“The space is where I can resist and counteract the medium's linearity,” Ratman told us. “This doesn't necessarily mean making it hermetically closed, but I think that a circular motion that relates to the architecture is the pattern that would have the strongest effect, and that would create the most interesting tension between ‘synchronic experience’ and ‘diachronic experience.’ The work happens between space



GILAD RATMAN
The Workshop (video still), 2013

Courtesy the artist and
 Braverman Gallery, Tel Aviv

**WHAT DOES IT MEAN IF WE
 ARE ALL MEDIA, AND THE BRAIN
 IS THE FIRST MEDIUM?**

MASSIMILIANO GIONI



Above
CORIN SWORN
The Foxes, 2013

HD video
Installation view Scotland + Venice 2013:
Sworn / Campbell / Tompkins
Courtesy of the artist and Kendall Koppe,
Glasgow
Photo: Ruth Clark

Left
Corin Sworn with *Untitled*, 2013
at Palazzo Pisani (S. Marina)

Photo: Marco Secchi / Getty Images for
Scotland + Venice
Copyright 2013 Getty Images



and narrative.” The objective wasn’t to produce a finished work to be contemplated, but rather a node or a site to be navigated, as the visitor, through their movement through the pavilion and interaction with the works, builds their own version of a “workshop”.

It was the writer and grande dame of postmodernism, Rosalind Krauss, who first coined the term “post-medium condition” in the year 2000, in her book “Voyage on the North Sea”, where she argued that when the medium (such as painting, sculpture, photography) has become irrelevant as it arguably had, then the subject matter in itself becomes the supporting medium. This is found in Ed Ruscha’s use of cars in his art – his works feature series of petrol stations (“26 Gasoline Stations”, the “Standard Station” series), cars (“Uphill Driver”, “Uncertain Frontier”) and road panoramæ. Ruscha uses a variety of media: film, photography and painting, but much of his work centres on an investigation of the visual landscape of the road and its surrounding features. Similarly, Tacita Dean has, throughout her career, performed an investigation into analogue 35 mm film and cinema. Her video work points to the limitations of digital technology (“FILM”) or exposes cinematic tropes (“Russian Ending”), where she imposed director’s notes on postcards of catastrophes, a reference to an early Danish filmmaking practice of producing two ends: a happy one for the American market, and a tragic one for the Russian market.

While many of these artists would reject this definition of narrative as medium, Krauss’ analysis did indeed presage the exploration of individual narrative that occurs in these artists’ practice, where the concept that fuses the disparate whole is derived from a particular subjective experience.

MEDIUMS DISSOLVE INTO MEDIUMS

Later that afternoon, in a Fifteenth Century palazzo that houses the Scottish pavilion, we encountered other artworks that illustrate something else of the post-medium condition, namely the dissolution of one medium inside another.

Corin Sworn’s video contribution to the Scottish pavilion (the pavilion featured three artists: Sworn, Duncan Campbell and Hayley Tompkins) was based on her father’s slide collection, taken in the Seventies in Peru during his stay as a social anthropologist among lama and sheep herders. Sworn and her father, Eric Smith, watched a slideshow which she filmed, with her father telling the story of his research. Sworn’s piece is both documentary and a multi-layered study of memory. The slides’ faded, overly saturated hues recall a different, less interconnected era, as do the pastoral images they document. The proto-Instagram aesthetic of Sworn’s found slides may have grown ubiquitous, but the matter has vanished: the photographs document a way of life since extinguished; Kodak, who produced the slide film, went bankrupt in 2012.

Sworn uses photographs as Readymades, and her appropriation is one of memory: through her father’s description of villagers and herdsmen, she is recording a personal history that took place before her birth and to which she has no immediate access. The film refuses to be pinned down, hovering seamlessly between documentary, personal video and anthropological investigation into extinct modes of being – the communities Smith catalogued on the advice of historian Eric Hobsbawm, and which fell apart under the pressures of the Peruvian Shining Path guerrillas in the Eighties and Nineties.

The piece was formally a video, but it is also a reflection on the possibilities contained within another set of media – the slides – that are central to the piece; narrative becomes unfixed, ambiguous. In the end, are we watching a dialogue between Sworn and her father? Or are we being encouraged to indulge in nostalgia for the recent past through the obsolete slide show? Or, are we witnessing demises – the end of a medium, the end of a culture? Through Sworn’s intertwining of media via the use of personal history, the boundaries between the disparate elements become unfixed. A further dimension of the post-medium condition occurs when the media themselves seem to bleed into each other, collapsing distinctions between photography and film, artefact and artwork, post-internet aesthetic and narrative.

The insistent Venetian downpour on Thursday afternoon provided an ideal reason to escape into the Arsenale, where young French artist Camille Henrot’s Silver Lion-winning video piece, “Grosse Fatigue” – a magical amalgamation of poetry, music and image – offered something similar.

You might call it “a mashup”, in the contemporary vernacular. The film is essentially a palimpsest of images and videos superimposed on a pre-installed Apple “Galaxy” desktop background. The computer desktop serves as carrier medium, with generic Photo Viewer software used to display images and videos. Henrot’s theme combines creation myths with Darwin’s theory of evolution. She aims to narrate the history of the universe over the course of a breathless 13-minute video, while pointing to the limits of totalising systems and structuralism. The spoken narrative is interpreted by singer Akwetey Orraca-Tetteh, member of the band Dragons of Zynth; the text itself is written by the poet Jacob Bromberg, and set to a Minimalist percussive soundtrack.

Beautifully manicured hands with nails lacquered in primary colours scatter marbles, flick test tubes and crack eggs; stock colour test images sit next to Wikipedia pages and found videos of internet memes: turtles laying eggs and crawling to the sea, for instance. Images of fetish statues collide with footage shot at the Smithsonian Institute for Research (Henrot produced part of the video during a residency there). Watching “Grosse Fatigue” is akin to aimlessly surfing through pages and pages of Tumblr gifs and YouTube, killing time, occasionally pausing to say, “look! The IKEA monkey in the coat! Baby turtles hatching! Stingrays swimming in the shallows!”, a sly nod to contemporary viewing habits.

“Grosse Fatigue” seemed to sit between media art, video, documentary and poetry, combining text with images, videos and sound, and binding these to a narrative, an instance of curator Nicholas Bourriaud’s notion of post-production, where the artist acts as a DJ, sampling narratives, artefacts and processes, appropriating other genres and methodologies.

Henrot may appear also to be riffing on Jörg Heiser’s concept of super-hybridity, where “...the number of cultural contexts tapped into by artists has increased dramatically, a result of dynamics of globalisation, digital technology, the internet and capitalism.” But in effect, what results is a piece of post-medium art par excellence, in which cultural signifiers are exposed and the media used blend and melt into each other. In its opulent blur of images, its appropriation and upending of story traditions, its nods to internet surf clubs and post-internet practices (while never fully sliding into that genre), it fully encapsulated the post-medium experience. It encompassed everything at the same time as possessing no real centre.

When we visited Irena Lagator-Peجویić’s installation at the Montenegrin pavilion on the (rather rainy) following morning, lost among narrow alleys and perilous bends, we took the wrong entrance, and found ourselves in a room covered in little stick men performing acrobatics. It firstly appeared as a meditation on mark-making and the human form, and secondly as a comment on drawing. The walls and ceiling were covered in coated canvas, which was patterned with hand-drawn rotating stick figures arranged in geometrical patterns. The next room was covered in black polyethylene, pierced with needles so that an artificial cosmos was created. We found ourselves playing in and interacting with the room, submerged in the hypnotic dark.

If a foregrounding of the viewer was central to Ratman’s work back in the Israeli pavilion, the theme continued in Lagator-Peجویić’s installation, called “Image Think”, although with subtle differences. In contrast to Ratman there is no unifying set of concepts or exploration of a larger narrative, but an investigation of the notion of “art as a social strategy.” Each of the three rooms in “Image Think” is “activated” by the viewer.

Something else was going on here, the extending of minimal art’s task of rendering the artwork subject to the viewer and the demands of space. Instead of remaining in the Merleau-Pontian universe of the sensual aesthetic, her pieces serve as a starting point, the hypnotic room of “Image Think” creating layers of perception through the dark space and the mirrored floor, heightening the visitor’s awareness of their body inside the space. The artist thus ceases to control the artwork, as in Gilad Ratman’s piece. With Lagator-Peجویić, however, it is not the unscripted instructions to participants but the viewers themselves who must complete the piece, as their eyes become adjusted to the dark, and they begin to move around the room, creating a subjective impression of the space. As every artist is well aware, effect is cheap but experience can be perception-altering.

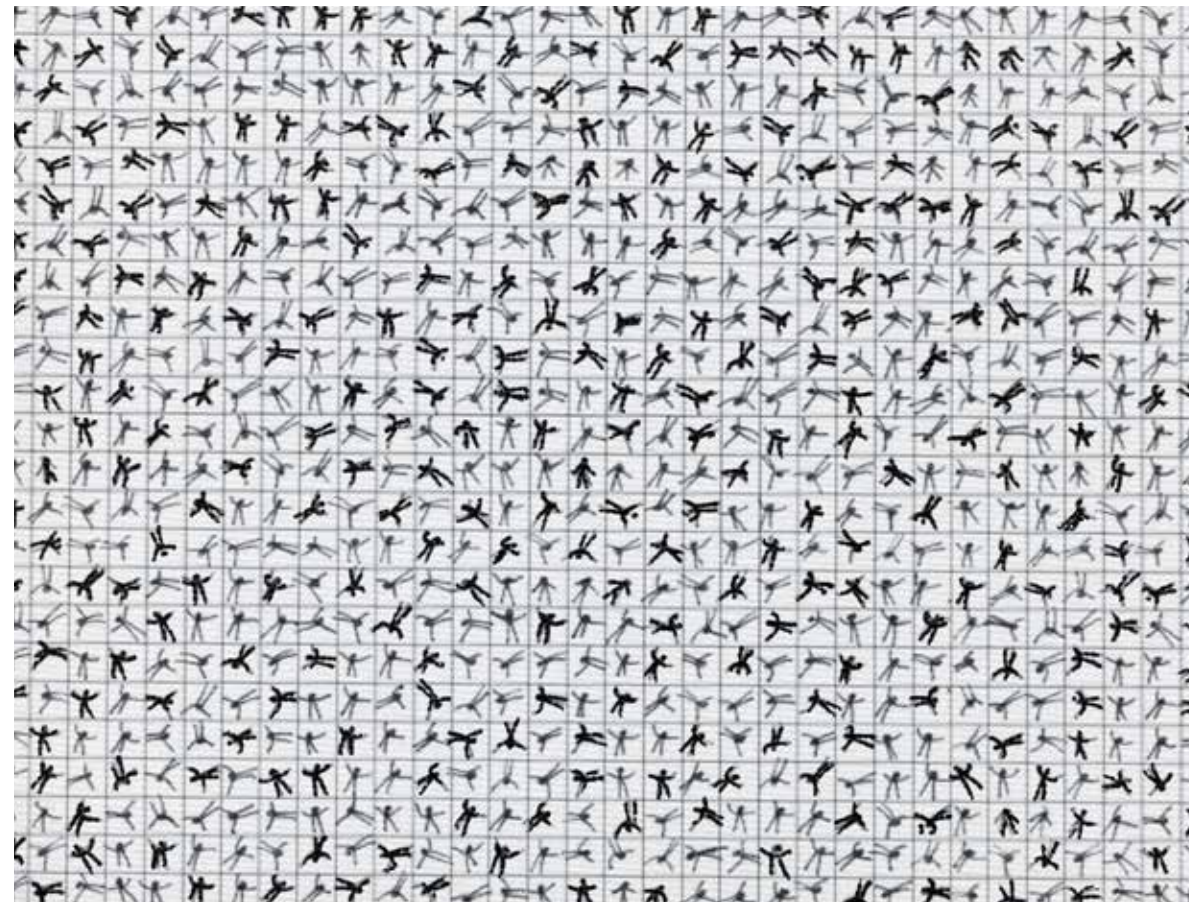
EVERYTHING, AND MORE

The 55th edition of the Venice Biennale confidently asserted a dynamic, evolving area of artistic practice: one that appears to be taking hold of artists from Cardiff to Berlin to Haifa and beyond. A movement that abandons, remixes and redefines media from video to installation, and practices from appropriation to intervention. Its narrative thrust places the subject – whether the artist or viewer – firmly in the spotlight, either through giving a personal twist to an abstract set of themes, as in Williams’ work, or by foregrounding the viewer and the viewer’s experience as with Ratman and Lagator-Peجویić. The post-internet mashup aesthetic is détourned to upset and re-read traditional media, and boundaries between music, poetry and visual art gleefully wiped away, as with Henrot’s “Grosse Fatigue”, and, to a subtler extent, with Sworn’s remixing of video and photography.

“It’s weird,” Gilad Ratman said. “If you’d asked me a month ago how my work related to the central concepts of Gioni’s curated show I would have asked, ‘what are you talking about?’ Trend is a shitty word, but let’s say there’s a zeitgeist that artists feel and react to.”

This Zeitgeist appears to be one where the central figures of art history, the art object and the artist, have disappeared from sight, leaving art as a joyous, energetic interplay of modes and experiences.

And then, it started raining again...



IRENA LAGATOR-PEJOVIĆ
Ecce Mundi, 2013

Drawing and print on canvas, ink,
 neon, wood
 306 x 306 x 236 cm
 Photo: Dario Lasagni



Left and above
 CAMILLE HENROT
Grosse Fatigue, 2013

Video installation, colour, 13 min
 Courtesy the artist and Kamel Mennour, Paris

