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I N T E R N A T I O N A L

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VENICE BIENNALE: FOUR VIEWS

3-D CINEMA

TORBJØRN RØDLAND



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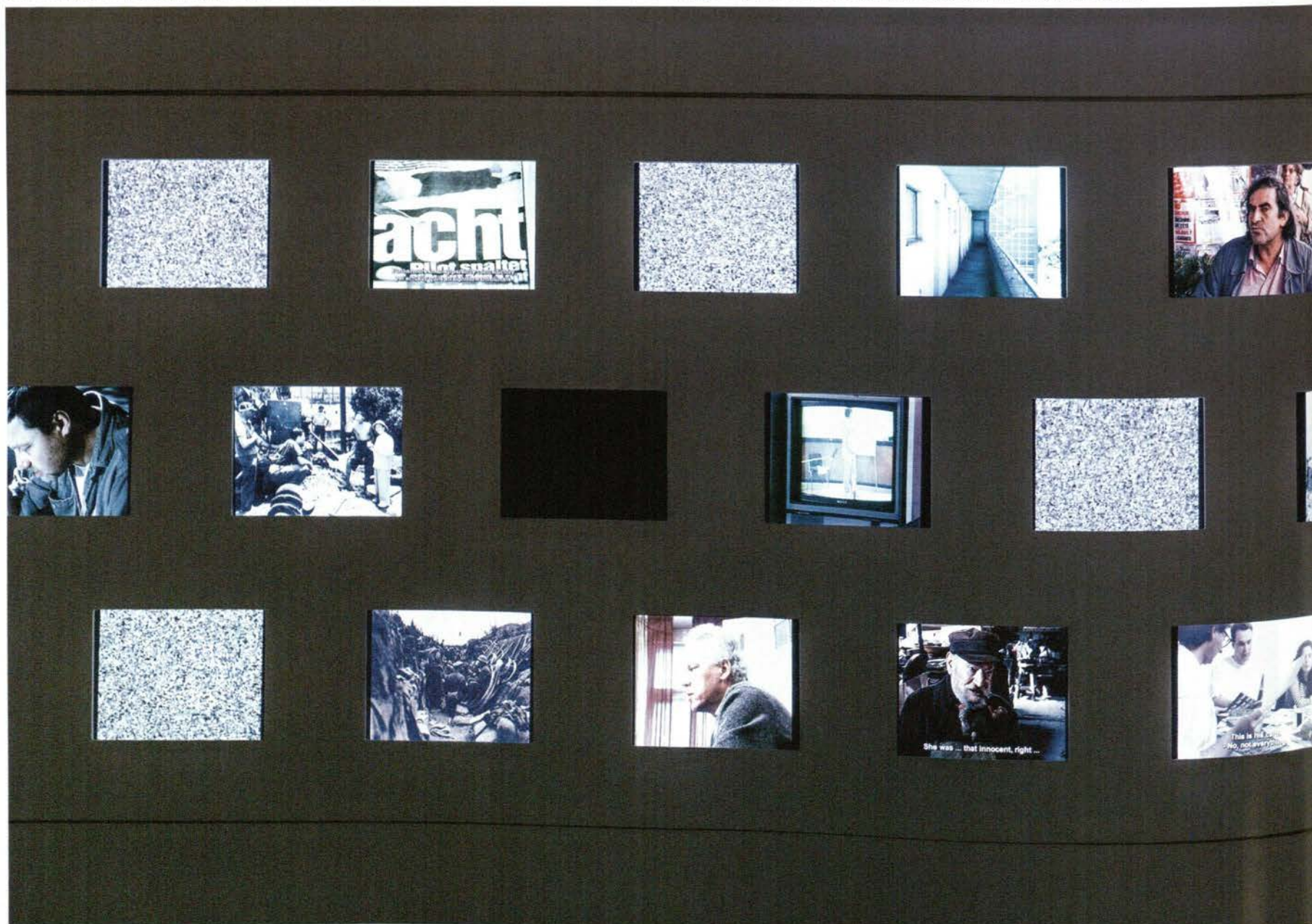


VENICE 2015

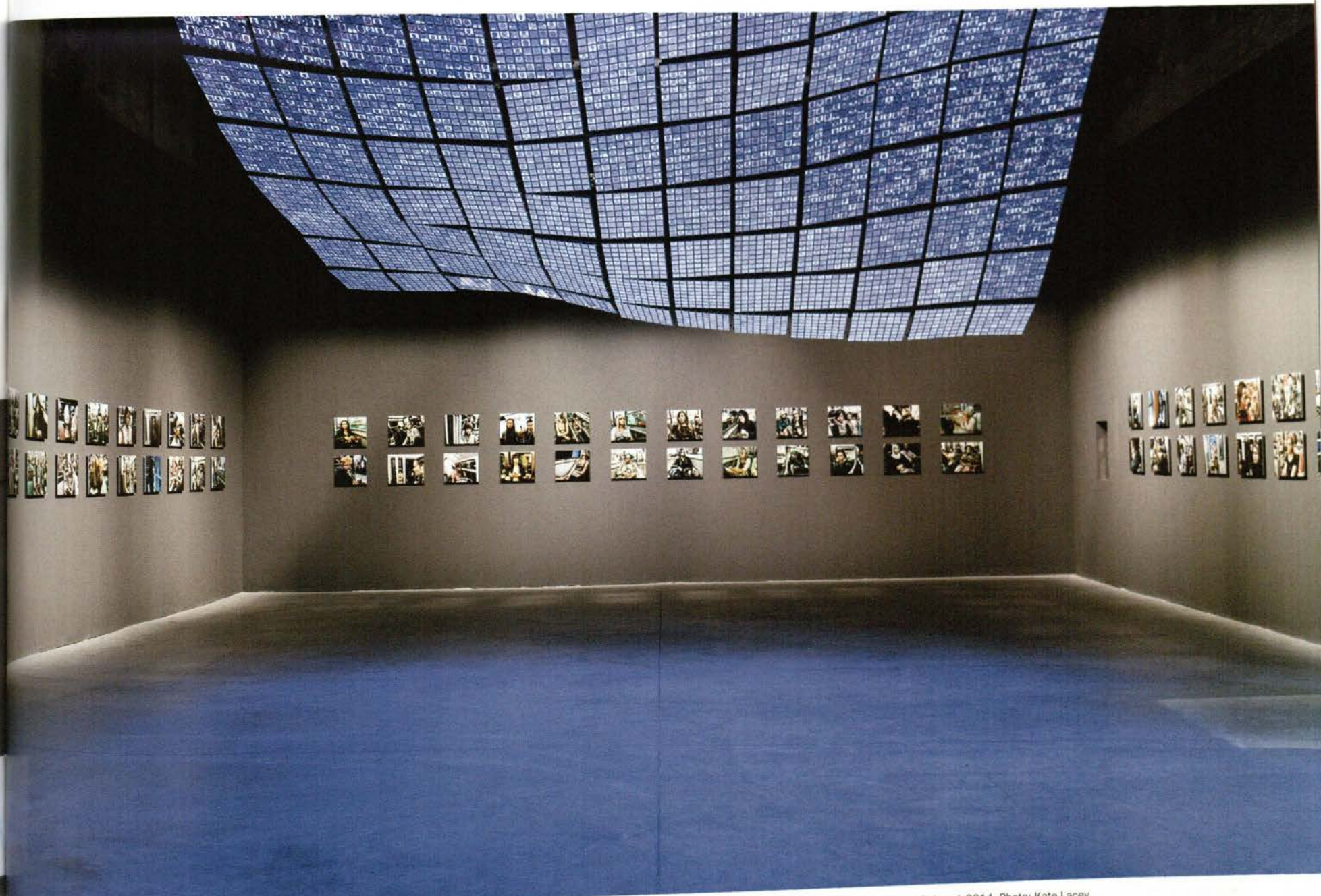
# Too Much Too Soon

JESSICA MORGAN

Atlas of Harun Farocki's Filmography (detail), 2015, notebooks, approx. one hundred copies of *Filmkritik* magazine, vitrine, eighty-six digital videos (color, sound, infinite duration). From "All the World's Futures."







View of "All the World's Futures," 2015, Arsenal, Venice. On walls: Chris Marker, *Untitled (Passengers #129)*, 2008–10. On ceiling: Kutluğ Ataman, *The Portrait of Sakip Sabancı*, 2014. Photo: Kate Lacey.

**SOMETIMES MORE IS LESS.** Despite its extensive documentation of alienating labor conditions past and present, despite multiple reflections on an atrophied human society, and despite a decidedly bleak view of the possibilities for political change, the Fifty-Sixth Venice Biennale is surprisingly easy on the eye and mind. Works are viewed, acknowledged, and effortlessly passed by. Although many performances and live works interrupt the exhibition's flow and call out for attention, very few offer a memorable or visceral experience.

This Biennale is an unexpected turn for curator Okwui Enwezor, who has produced so many powerful and original exhibitions—including the traveling "The Short Century: Independence and Liberation Movements in Africa, 1945–1994" in 2001–2002, Documenta 11 in Kassel in 2002, and "Archive Fever: Uses of the Document in Contemporary Art" at New York's International Center of Photography in 2008. These complex and groundbreaking projects introduced

lesser-known figures in installations that were paced so that dense information and new or unfamiliar work could be absorbed and appreciated. In particular, Documenta 11 opened a space for documentary approaches, alerting us to the poetry of many artists who, through years of committed practice, had revealed aspects of the world with an élan and intensity that went far beyond reportage or simple fact-finding. Think back to the Documenta contributions of Kutluğ Ataman, David Goldblatt, Amar Kanwar, Jonas Mekas, Ulrike Ottinger, and Allan Sekula. Or, indeed, to the remarkable number of artists whose practice is so deeply invested in a relationship to time: Georges Adéagbo, Stanley Brouwn, Hanne Darboven, Cecilia Edefalk, Chohreh Feyzjou, Thomas Hirschhorn, On Kawara, Dieter Roth, Joëlle Tuerlinckx, and Yang Fudong, among many others. Yet such dedicated and trenchant expositions of work are curiously absent from this Biennale.





What, precisely, is missing in Venice? What created the gravitas of Enwezor's previous exhibitions, and what is lost here? A simple answer is space and time. While Documenta 11, produced over four or five years with a curatorial team of six, had just 116 participating artists, the Venice Biennale, curated by Enwezor in less than two years, has 136. This number includes many artists with whom Enwezor has not worked previously, and whose contributions are crammed into David Adjaye's tight architectural framework.

The differences between Enwezor's past and present curatorial endeavors are most apparent where he includes artists with ambitions of duration and scale similar to those he championed at Documenta. Instead of the exclusive cinema space constructed for Ottinger in Kassel, or the spacious rooms for Sekula, a claustrophobic room in the Arsenale houses a contribution by the exemplary late filmmaker Harun Farocki, which consists of eighty-six films presented on dozens

of small-scale, security-monitor-like screens, *all* playing simultaneously in a manner that defies concentration. (As some reprieve, an additional annex does show a single film daily.) Ataman and Chris Marker, both artists synonymous with an expansive *durée*, are forced to cohabitate in one space. Their extensive serial projects documenting anonymous individuals (portraits of people who crossed paths with Turkish business leader Sakıp Sabancı, and of subjects on the Métro in Paris, respectively) are installed in a ceiling-and-wall configuration that cancels out each artist's work through duplication and repetition. And in the sad arrangement in the Central Pavilion of Marcel Broodthaers's *Jardin d'hiver* (Winter Garden), 1974, the artist's analysis of bourgeois display is reduced—one can only assume with ironic intention or dialectical rousing—to mere self-reflexive decoration: the nonspace of potted-plant environments that characterize so many cinema and theater foyers, and precisely the type of location that the work comments on.





Clockwise, from top left: Allora & Calzadilla, *In the Midst of Things*, 2015, Performance view, Arsenale, Venice, May 5, 2015. Photo: Alex John Beck. Thomas Hirschhorn, *Roof Off*, 2015, mixed media. Installation view, Central Pavilion, Venice. Photo: Kate Lacey. Marcel Broodthaers, *Un jardin d'hiver* (Winter Garden), 1974, thirty-six palm trees, six photographs, sixteen folding chairs, two vitrines, various art prints and catalogues, rolled carpet. Installation view, Central Pavilion, Venice, 2015. Photo: Kate Lacey. **the TOMORROW**, *Figures of Kapital*, 2015. Performance view, Arena, Central Pavilion, Venice, May 8, 2015. Photo: Sara Sagui.



As suggested by the awkward title “All the World’s Futures,” an attention to time, both historical and phenomenal, and a parallel investment or dedication to artists are clearly intended here. Yet the actual experience of the show does not deliver. Case in point is the elaborate and unprecedented Arena, right at the heart of the Central Pavilion. In a move at once brilliantly revealing and utterly promising, Enwezor and Adjaye resolved the awkward upper gallery space of the pavilion by breaking through a back wall, so that the space became balcony seating for a newly constructed theater hosting time-based works, performances, and live events. The intervention is spatially inspired but programmatically lackluster. The dark environment and red carpet (why are the skylights not used to greater effect, which would then produce the desired atmosphere of a forum?) neutralize performances. They begin to blur into a tonal similitude, such that the reading of Karl Marx’s *Das Kapital* (directed by Isaac Julien) and the spoken word

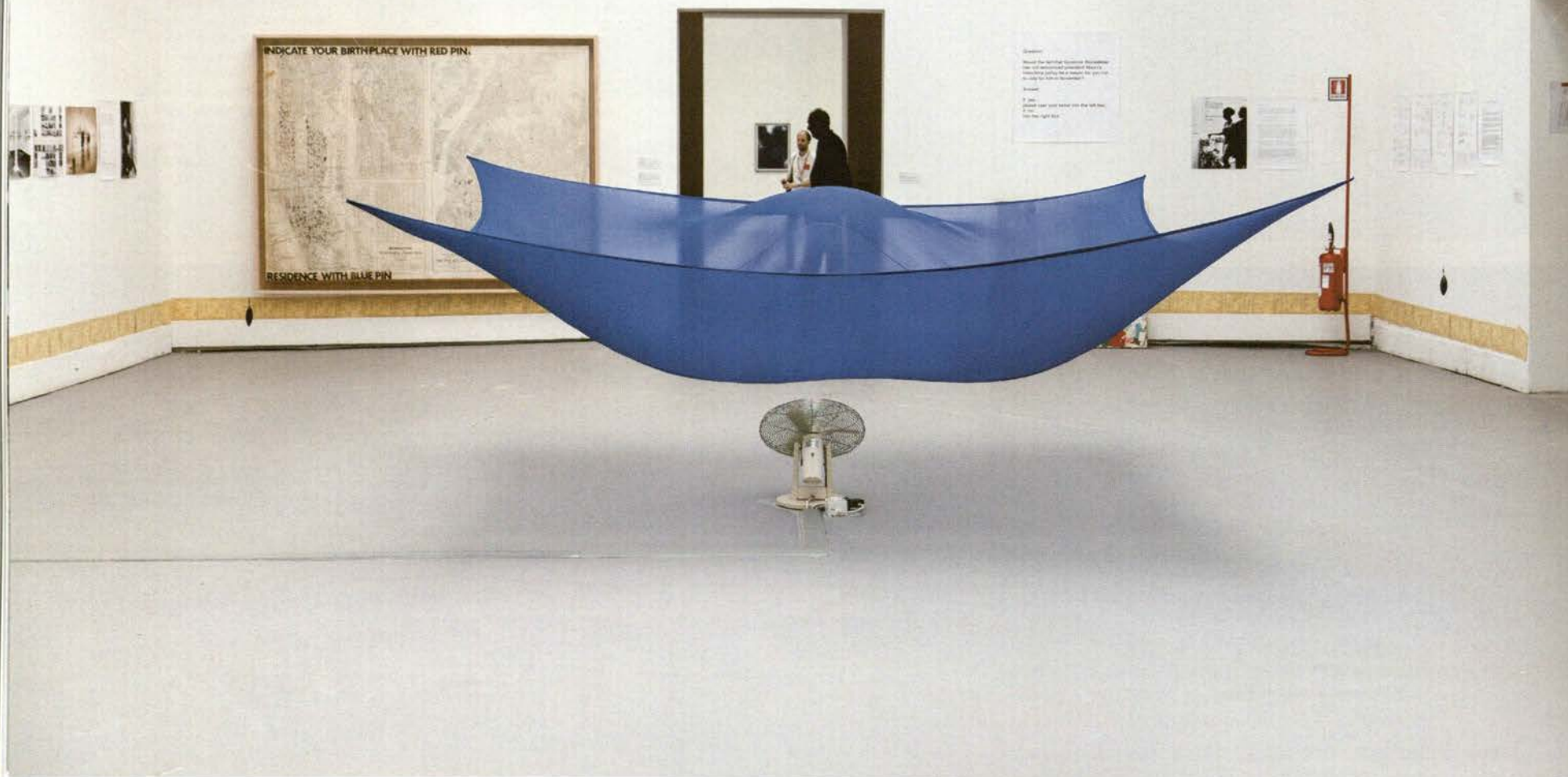
performance and accompanying images of Joana Hadjithomas and Khalil Joreige are largely undifferentiated by staging.

There are many situations in which artists with storied and even remarkable pasts at the Biennale (and also within the history of Enwezor’s exhibition making) are represented in a haphazard and reductive manner. Given the concept for “All the World’s Futures”—exploring the precarity of the global present through alternative visions of the future—one can only wonder whether artists and curator conspired in this superficiality, in order to subvert the facility of the dominant socioeconomic structure for the production and reception of contemporary art. (But more on the question of intentionality later.)

In the Seventh Gwangju Biennale, which he organized in 2008 with Hyunjin Kim and Ranjit Hoskote, Enwezor devoted spacious galleries to the work of Hans Haacke—an artist who again appears in Venice, but here is crowded into



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Hans Haacke, *Blue Sail*, 1964–65, chiffon, oscillating fan, fishing weights, thread. Installation view, Central Pavilion, Venice, 2015. From "All the World's Futures." Photo: Kate Lacey.

one small space. Is this showing a comment on increasingly stifling conditions for politicized art? Or a mere name-checking of past collaborators? A similar redundancy is found in Philippe Parreno's light pieces, recently shown in Paris as elegantly simple punctuations in the massive space of the Palais de Tokyo. In Venice, these functional forms are easily mistaken for unnecessary lighting design in an already overcrowded venue. Artists such as Hirschhorn, Jeremy Deller, and Allora & Calzadilla, who have had extensive opportunities to present major works in Venice in the very recent past, are also included. The presence of their work raises questions about the artists' own choice to be exhibited or perform again, in the same or proximate spaces, albeit in a reduced variant of their previous manifestations.

And yet, how can we expect the director of a major institution such as the Haus der Kunst in Munich—a role Enwezor took on only four years ago—to

simultaneously produce a large-scale international exhibition? It would seem an impossible task to juggle both responsibilities and excel. Enwezor's effort to research and present works by artists who are new to the context of such an exhibition is to be applauded. But if these artists are then presented in less than favorable conditions, their work is doomed to disappear in the cacophony of voices and presentations that now proliferates throughout the art world. Somewhat bafflingly, the largest spaces in Venice are in fact devoted to artists with long-established careers, though arguably not at stages of their work that offer any new direction or discovery. Georg Baselitz, Katharina Grosse, and Chris Ofili are given the exceptional conditions of solo presentations, while lesser-known figures are left to sink or swim in the Arsenale's maze.

If documentary practice was the form of artistic production revered in Documenta 11, it is sound that is the identifiable trope of this Biennale. In fact,





Jeremy Deller, *All That Is Solid Melts into Air*, 2013–15, mural painting by Stuart Sam Hughes, jukebox. Installation view, Central Pavilion, Venice, 2015. From "All the World's Futures." Photo: Kate Lacey.

some of the strongest works—by Terry Adkins, Chantal Akerman, Charles Gaines, and Steve McQueen—are defined by their sound tracks, scores, or acoustics. The Arena privileges voice above all with the continuous reading of *Das Kapital*. And yet such utterances and echoes are often lost amid the auditory inundation of both the pavilion and the Arsenale—or simply dampened by the thick profusion of galleries—so that performances, films, and sound-based works dissipate into a sea of audience conversation and ambient noise, and into a warren of walls and works. The incredible art of Adkins at the start of the Arsenale is muffled and crushed in its corridor location. The same fate befalls Melvin Edwards's starkly compelling wall sculptures that line the adjacent narrow corridor, a space that simultaneously hosts, among other works, a sung performance piece by Allora & Calzadilla.

The remarkable negation of presence throughout the Biennale, despite its

intensely full roster, leaves the impression that this must have been a deliberate choice. Indeed, perhaps Enwezor means to offer a critical reflection on the conditions for presenting art, conditions that have led to a proliferation of mammoth exhibitions without any aspiration to decisive action or distinction, but simply with the aim of positioning works next to one another in contexts that are more or less reflective of commodity spaces or spaces of consumption. We might just be witnessing an attempt to make "All the World's Futures" operate as what Jürgen Habermas called a "performative contradiction," which does what it denounces, and whose conditions in an advanced culture industry must defeat their original conception. □

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

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