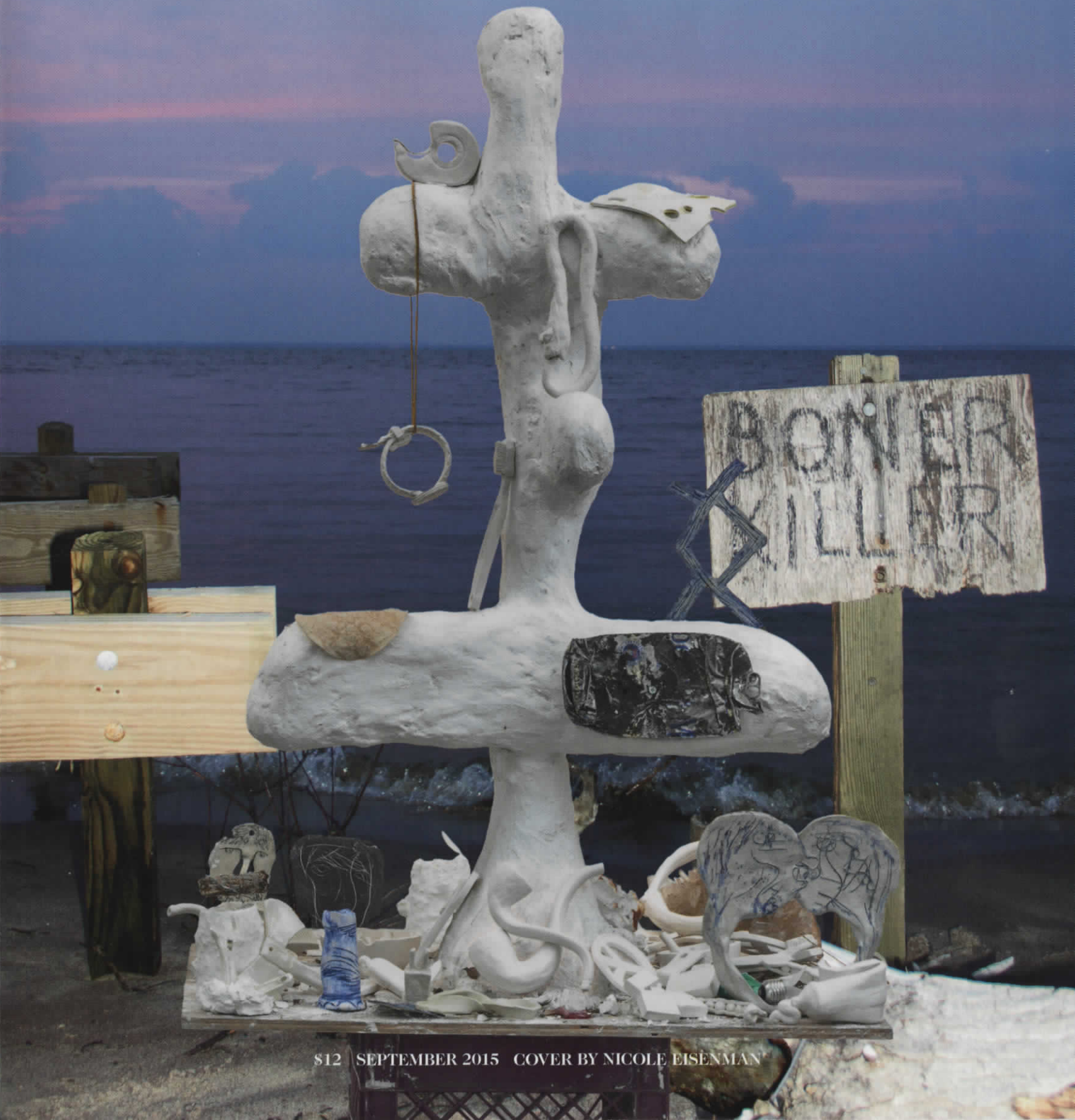


Art in America



Art in America

84

THE FORM-GIVER: A PICASSO SYMPOSIUM

With a Picasso sculpture survey opening this month at MoMA, nine artists consider his changing significance in the 21st century—their responses often contrasting with those in *A.i.A.*'s December 1980 special section on the museum's blockbuster Picasso retrospective.

96

PAVILION PROBLEMS

by Brian Droiteour

What is there in the history of the Venice Biennale—or in its current procedures—that dampens the quality of so many national displays?

102

READING CAPITAL IN VENICE

by Travis Jeppesen

with drawings by Bjarne Melgaard

Touring the Biennale, a fictional critic muses on the contradictions between the show's socially conscious theme and its wealth-and-fame realities.

112

BLOOD AND REFUSE

by Edgar Arceneaux

From his poignant response to the Watts Uprising to his contemplative work in Joshua Tree, "junk art" virtuoso Noah Purifoy was a guiding figure for generations of African-American artists.

122

FREEDOM IN THE GRAY ZONE

by Olga Stefan

Even in the dictatorial environment of 1960s and '70s Romania, progressive photographers and video-makers found ways to share their clandestine art.

130

IN THE STUDIO: TANIA BRUGUERA

with Travis Jeppesen

At her house in Havana, the activist artist reflects on her conscience-pricking performances, her anticapitalist convictions, her concerns for Cuba's future—and her many run-ins with the secret police.



Cover: Nicole Eisenman and Tiffany Malakooti, *Art in America (Fire Island)*, 2015, plaster, taco shell, the Meat Rack, sunset, Photoshop and mixed mediums, 10% by 9 inches. See Contributors page.

Contributors

NICOLE EISENMAN

Painter Nicole Eisenman took inspiration from Picasso's sculptural works, on display at New York's Museum of Modern Art from Sept. 16, 2015, to Feb. 7, 2016, to create this month's cover. The Brooklyn-based artist is well known for playfully employing a variety of techniques culled from the history of painting (notice replicas of Magritte's famous pipe at the bottom center) to depict highly personal, contemporary subjects. "Dear Nemesis, Nicole Eisenman 1993-2013," a traveling midcareer retrospective, is at the Museum of Contemporary Art San Diego through Sept. 6.

LYNETTE YIADOM-BOAKYE

British artist Lynette Yiadom-Boakye's figurative paintings present black subjects drawn from and her imagination. In her Muse column, Yiadom-Boakye extolls the virtue of make-believe, recalling her childhood in South London with two older brothers who fostered her rich interior life. An exhibition of her work, "Verses After Dark," is on view at the Serpentine Gallery, London, through Sept. 13.

TRAVIS JEPPESEN

Berlin-based writer and artist Travis Jeppesen is a PhD candidate at the Royal College of Art, London. His books include the novels *The Suiciders* (2013) and *Wolf at the Door* (2007) and a collection of art criticism, *Disorientations: Art on the Margins of the Contemporary* (2008). In 2013, he received a Creative Capital/Warhol Foundation Arts Writers Grant, and in 2014 presented work in the Whitney Biennial. Jeppesen contributes two pieces to this issue: he visits Cuban artist Tania Bruguera in her home and surveys "All the World's Futures," the titular exhibition at the current Venice Biennale, through the eyes of the fictional Cheb, a multicultural art-world insider.

OLGA STEFAN

Chicago native Olga Stefan, formerly executive director of the Chicago Artists Coalition (2005-08) and executive director of Around the Coyote Arts Festival (1998-2003), has been living in Zurich since 2009. For this issue, she reports on underground Romanian artists of the 1960s and '70s who produced experimental video and photography outside the bounds of state-sanctioned cultural institutions.

PETER PLAGENS

Peter Plagens, a writer, artist and contributing editor to *A.i.A.*, was the longtime art critic for *Newsweek* and currently writes regularly for the *Wall Street Journal*. Plagens has authored *Bruce Nauman: The True Artist* (2014) and *Sunshine Muse: Art on the West Coast, 1945-1970* (1974), among other works. Here, he reviews art historian Thomas Crow's recent book *The Long March of Pop*.

BRIAN DROITCOUR

Brian Droitcour is an associate editor of *Art in America*. Currently a PhD candidate in comparative literature at New York University, Droitcour is the editor of Klaus eBooks, a series of digital artist's publications and *The Animated Reader: Poetry of Surround Audience*, a poetry anthology that accompanied the 2015 New Museum Triennial. Here, he critiques the national pavilions at the Venice Biennale, on view through Nov. 22.

CHARLES EPPLEY

Brooklyn-based Charles Eppley currently teaches at both Pratt Institute and Stony Brook University, New York, where he is a PhD candidate in art history and criticism, focusing on the role of sound in modern and contemporary art. He also works as an editor of the online publication *Avant*. In this issue, Eppley writes on *Dream House*, the experimental sound and light environment by La Monte Young and Marian Zazeela.

Editor's Letter

POOR PABLO! Last century's poster boy for the male genius artist is this month's muse for Nicole Eisenman's cover—and what does she do? Deflates his manhood. She's made a powerful and enigmatic image: part sculpture, part drawing, part photograph.



Pablo Picasso: *Chair*, 1961, painted sheet metal, 45½ by 45 by 35 inches. Musée national Picasso, Paris. © Estate of Pablo Picasso/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York.

An amorphous, white phallic object appears to have washed up on a beach at dusk. Eisenman's cover evokes the experimental and eclectic nature of Picasso's sculpture practice, both in the choice of materials (white plaster, ceramics, found objects and metal) and the collage effect she achieves by combining seemingly unrelated objects and producing formal fractures. A pile of detritus, also white, clumped at the base includes Magritte-style pipes, a wristwatch, a slice of Swiss cheese, a broken lightbulb, a Zippo lighter, a toothbrush, a peace sign

and an embracing couple drawn in Eisenman's distinctive hand.

This motley array suggests many things: the passage of time, decay, the twilight of modernism and a strong wit. Eisenman created *Art in America's* Picasso-infused cover to coincide with the opening this month of the Picasso sculpture survey at New York's Museum of Modern Art. We also invited nine artists to share their thoughts about Picasso, echoing a symposium commissioned by *A.i.A.* in 1980, when MoMA mounted a major retrospective.

Travis Jeppesen traveled to Venice to see this year's Biennale. Instead of the usual review, he takes an unorthodox approach, blending fact and fiction and veering into satire. While I disagree with many of the opinions of his fictional art critic Cheb, Jeppesen raises some poignant questions about art-world hypocrisies. Jeppesen's sometime collaborator Bjarne Melgaard responded to his article with a group of drawings, which leave us grateful and amused. Meanwhile, *A.i.A.* associate editor Brian Droitcour weighs in on the Biennale with an examination of the national pavilion system, wondering why so much money, effort and time yields such critically weak results.

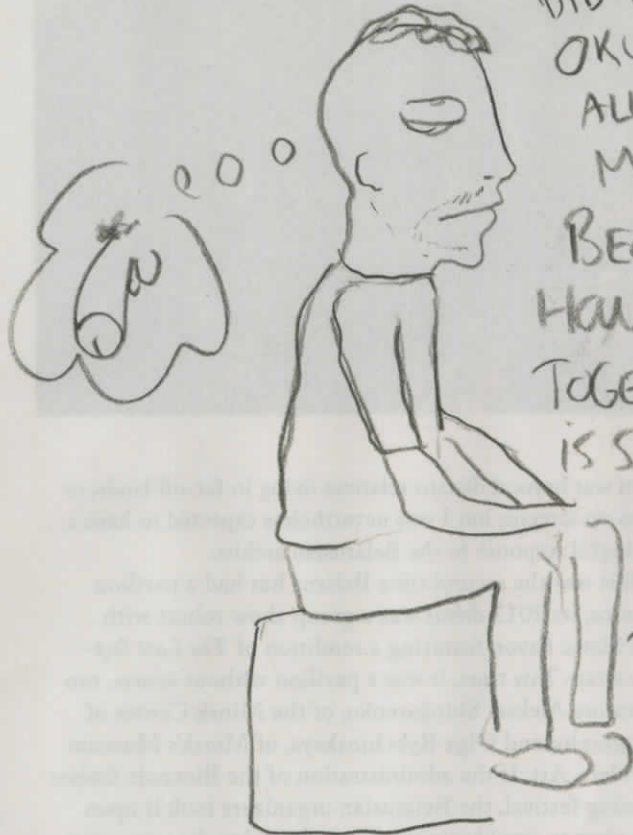
This issue also contains a thoughtful treatise on Romanian video and photography by Olga Stefan, who spent several months immersed in that scene. Elsewhere, we hear from artist Edgar Arceneaux, who provides a personal account of the work and life of the late and underappreciated Noah Purifoy, who is currently the subject of a major show at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art.

The intrepid Jeppesen also went to the Havana Biennial in Cuba this summer. During his visit, he spoke with Tania Bruguera about her recent travails with the Cuban government, and we are happy to have this lively and timely interview.

Lindsay Pollock

LINDSAY POLLOCK

AND WHY
WAS JULIENS
PARTY SPONSERED
BY ROLLS ROYCE?



DID EVER ISAAC JULIEN OR
OKWUI REALLY READ
ALL THREE VOLUMES OF
MARX MANIFESTO?
BECAUSE IF THEY DID
HOW COULD THEY PUT
TOGETHER A SHOW THAT
IS SO MISSING IN ANY
IMPLICATIONS ABOUT THE
REAL ART WORLD POWER STRUGGLE?
TO MAKE A SPECTACLE THAT
BENEFITS ~~THE~~ MOST FROM
CAPITAL IT PRETENDS TO
MAKE ITSELF DISTANT ~~THE~~ FROM

READING CAPITAL IN VENICE

What does an art writer, real or otherwise, think about while walking through the Biennale during opening week?

by Travis Jeppesen
Drawings by Bjarne Melgaard

I.

IT IS THE SPRING of dead bodies, failed refugees, washing up on European shores, the end of a season in hell in America that saw a spate of killings of unarmed black men by police officers. The spring in which a white, so-called Conceptual poet gave a reading of one of those victims' autopsy reports as a "found poem" at an Ivy League university. The spring when yet another white, so-called Conceptual poet drew even more negative attention to herself as she continued to tweet Margaret Mitchell's *Gone with the Wind* line by line, including the most blatantly racist passages. The year that, for the first time that anyone can remember, the Venice Biennale broke with its tradition by opening in spring instead of summer, and the first time in history that the Biennale's curation was given over to a black man, one of a handful who have managed to attain success in the art world. Okwui Enwezor, whose own ascent was perhaps made a bit easier by his coming from a wealthy Nigerian family, built his central thesis on the issue of class rather than race—though, as anyone who has received a liberal arts education at an American university in the past three decades should be able to tell you, the two are inextricably linked.

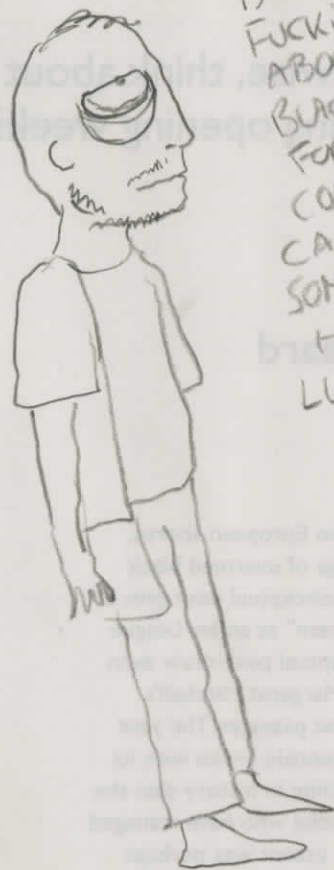
Heading for the Biennale preview, Cheb, a 31-year-old art critic of Hungarian descent (hence the name) but in actuality equal parts English, Israeli, Afro-Cuban and German (as these things go), arrives on time at Berlin's Tegel airport for his Alitalia flight to Venice Marco Polo. On the plane, he is seated next to a blue-chip Berlin gallerist whose program largely consists of German Conceptual artists, most of whom peaked in the 1990s, making cerebral art of the most yawn-inducing variety (to Cheb at least), with a couple of American Conceptualists from the 1960s thrown in as historical justification. Although she doesn't really need the press, she recognizes that Cheb is considered "hot" at the

CURRENTLY
ONVIEW
"All the World's
Futures," Venice
Biennale, through
Nov. 22.

TRAVIS JEPPESEN
is a writer and
artist who lives
in Berlin. See
Contributors page.

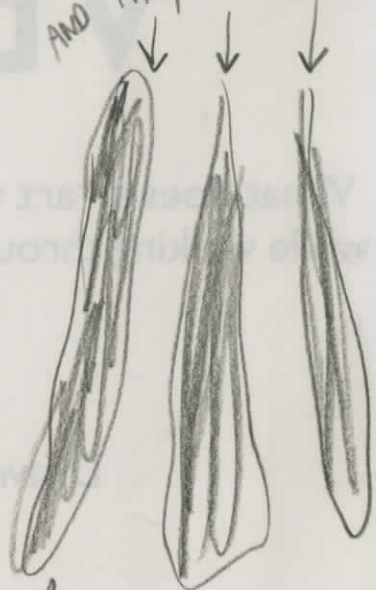
BJARNE
MELGAARD is a
Norwegian artist
living in New York.

HEROIN IS REALLY THE BEST



IS NOT SOMEBODY SOON
FUCKING SICK TO DEATH
ABOUT ART ABOUT POOR
BLACK PEOPLE MADE
FOR RICH CORRUPT
COLLECTORS WHO
CAN BUY THEMSELVES
SOME RADICALITY TO
HANG IN THEIR
LUXURY PENTHOUSES

AND THEY ARE BLACK!



LOOK OSCAR MURILLIO
LET SOME POOR KIDS
PAINT ON HIS PAINTINGS!

moment, and constantly nags him to review her shows. Troublingly, he has ignored all of her dinner invitations for the past year.

"What a surprise!" she exclaims as she nestles her ginormous posterior into the seat next to him.

They make small talk about the Biennale as the plane trundles down the runway in preparation for takeoff. Cheb absolutely cannot miss the German pavilion, she insists, where two of her artists are presenting. Cheb delivers the news that his assignment is to cover solely the main exhibition, "All the World's Futures," on which subject she has a prejudgment to deliver: "Oh, I do love Okwui, but we all know what *that* one is going to look like. If only he didn't have to play the *race card* all the time!"

There was a time when Cheb would have been stunned by such a statement. He has never really considered himself white, though everyone else does. Naturally, he understands perfectly well that passing as such his entire life has at least partly contributed to the modicum of success he enjoys in the art world. (Part Two: while he is certainly not rich, he also does not give off any obvious signs of being poor.) It would be easy to call the gallerist out, to give her one of those dreaded reality checks, but Cheb does not have the energy, at present, to properly enjoy the scene of her humiliation. Instead, he takes advantage of the awkward lull in the conversation to nod off.

THE ART WORLD runs on fear: this is something else Cheb has figured out over time. Having studied Marx in college, Cheb knows that from a purely materialistic standpoint, this can be attributed to surplus value, upon which the entire art game is premised, and which creates a constant state of uncertainty and insecurity among all its participants. So omnipotent is the force that it leaks from the realm of the "merely" economical to contaminate not just the aesthetic integrity upon which everything is ostensibly based but, more importantly, the information economy through which art travels. Knowledge thus emerges as the highly valued product of the socialization network known as the Art World, the oil that fuels the fear engine, giving rise to an environment characterized by a high level of desperation, regardless of whether one finds oneself on the buying or the selling side of the equation. You don't have to have a strong opinion (in fact, it helps a lot if you don't), but you do have to *know everyone* and *everything*, or at least pretend to—or else you're simply out of the game.

In Venice, Cheb checks into a tiny bed-and-breakfast in Castello. He learns it was the former apartment of Alberto Gianquinto, a little-known Venetian painter who passed away in 2003 and whose expressionist paintings, featuring a muted and largely pastel palette, adorn the walls. All of the furnishings have been kept intact—in one of the large, airy bedrooms sits a grand piano. Cheb has booked the sole single-occupancy room, which is the size of a monk's cell, with a shared bathroom. Still,



Bruce Nauman: *American Violence*, 1981-82, neon tubes and neon signs. Photo Alessandra Chemollo.

he realizes that, at 65 euros a night, he has unwittingly scored the best accommodation deal in town.

On his way into the Arsenale, he already begins to hear the whispers. "It's so dark, so pessimistic!" a middle-aged white dame in fake pearls and Gucci sunglasses exclaims to a famous New York shark dealer Cheb passes at the entrance. Cheb skims the wall text in order to get the gist of the layout. Enwezor has conceived of "All the World's Futures" as a composition of three intersecting filters: "Garden of Disorder," "Liveness: On Epic Duration" and "Capital: A Live Reading." Cheb intuitively "intersects" the bit to mean that they won't be delineated, so he knows not to look for signs but to try and absorb the thing, at least this first time through, as a whole. The idea, the text maintains, is to use the "filters" as

a means of reflecting on both the current "state of things" and the "appearance of things"—so, conditionality and looks, rather than the things-in-themselves; a defiant neglect of ontology in favor of context, with something about a "parliament of forms" thrown in to give it all a democratic flavor, perhaps satisfying some EU funding requirement. Everyone who can afford to be in Venice at this moment is, in some sense, equal.

If the rich woman's complaint sparked his interest, the starkness of Enwezor's production turns Cheb on right away. It begins with a room of Bruce Nauman neons (such as *American Violence*, 1981-82) in concert with *Nymphaeas* (2015), swords and knives grouped together in bouquet formations across the floor by Adel Abdessemed. The works are dark, edgy and rife with evocations of violence and human misery—all things that Cheb loves and that the art world either tries to conveniently ignore or else dumb down to avoid dealing with fully. There is no dumbing down in the first rooms of the Arsenale. It is all there: the futility of labor, the draconian nature of war, the absurdity of the harsh and drastic inequalities permeating every aspect of life in the 21st century.

Cheb moves on to the wall sculptures of Melvin Edwards, made out of twisted welded steel: heavy metal. The recent black paintings of Daniel Boyd, which Cheb will also encounter later in the Giardini, further enrich the allegations of bleakness (blackness?) being hurled at Enwezor, as do the black chainsaw sculptures by Monica Bonvicini titled "Latent Combustion" (2015), which Cheb will be reminded of when he sees Oscar Murillo's large drooping oil rags adorning the Giardini's entrance.

Then there's the moving image work. Cheb already saw Antje Ehmann and Harun Farocki's film installation *Labour in a Single Shot* (2011-14) in Berlin, so he can skip its international survey of work sites and conditions. Another room is given over to Farocki's entire socially engaged cinematic oeuvre, which seems fitting, concept-wise, though it also seems to Cheb like one of those typically impossible Venice Biennale gestures—who the hell will have time to watch the entire thing? (On that note, the same might be said of Alexander Kluge's 570-minute-long film adaptation, 2008,

All installation shots this article from the exhibition "All the World's Futures," 2015. Courtesy Venice Biennale.

of Marx's *Capital* in the Giardini.) Much more manageable is Raha Raissnia's *Longing* (2014), a beautiful and moving 16mm print that shows blurred overexposed black-and-white ghost images bleeding into one another; the soothing sounds of a motorized hum forming the soundtrack. An abstract, seemingly diaristic collection of fragments of fugitive images occasionally coalesce—an arm hanging down holding a cigarette, the newspaper photograph of a bearded revolutionary, a block of city streets from above—before fading back into shapes that cannot be discerned.

So far, there is an aesthetic unity in the curation of the Arsenale, with its favoring of a dark palette, dim lighting (exacerbated by Philippe Parreno's literally titled *56 Flickering Lights*, 2013, installed throughout the exhibition), a dramatic obsession with the casting of shadows (Cheb can't help but read this as a metaphor for the dark continent, the Occident's otherization of Africa) and sharp angular forms, suggesting a "masculine" privileging of the sculptural over the painterly.

Unfortunately, the effect is ruined the moment Cheb walks into the third corderie, which has been given over entirely to Katharina Grosse for one of her installations of rainbow-painted detritus. Yet another tacky instance of Grosse-out, with seemingly nothing to do with anything that has come before. It all goes straight to Cheb's stomach; thankfully, there is an exit. He makes his way outside to the toilets. Along the way, he passes through one of the most impressive (read: largest) works in the exhibition, Ibrahim Mahama's *Out of Bounds* (2014-15), comprising hundreds of coal sacks stitched together and hung on either side of a high-walled outdoor corridor. That's right, thinks Cheb as he makes his way through the crowd of journalists and art-world professionals taking selfies among the sacks in their designer sunglasses, we're all just lumps of coal.

WHEN HE RESUMES where he left off, things go wrong again. This time, the problem is David Adjaye's exhibition architecture, something of a calamity. Is this the promised "garden of disorder"? Too many walls form an incoherent maze, perhaps unwittingly mimicking the layout of Venetian streets. Maybe Enwezor is partly to blame for simply including too much stuff. But the problem is intractable; Adjaye's space just doesn't flow. Cheb constantly has to backtrack, retrace his steps and is still not certain he hasn't missed something. This state of bewilderment is unfair to the artworks; as a result of the strange architectural walls, works of art (sculptures especially) become barriers you just want to get around, and thus lose their effectiveness.

As his attention drifts owing to the confusion of the layout, Cheb begins to suspect that this is where Enwezor has stashed the weakest work, the more mundane exercises in cultural anthropology that serve as rather typical examples of "political art," such as Murillo's display of canvases he allowed schoolchildren of various



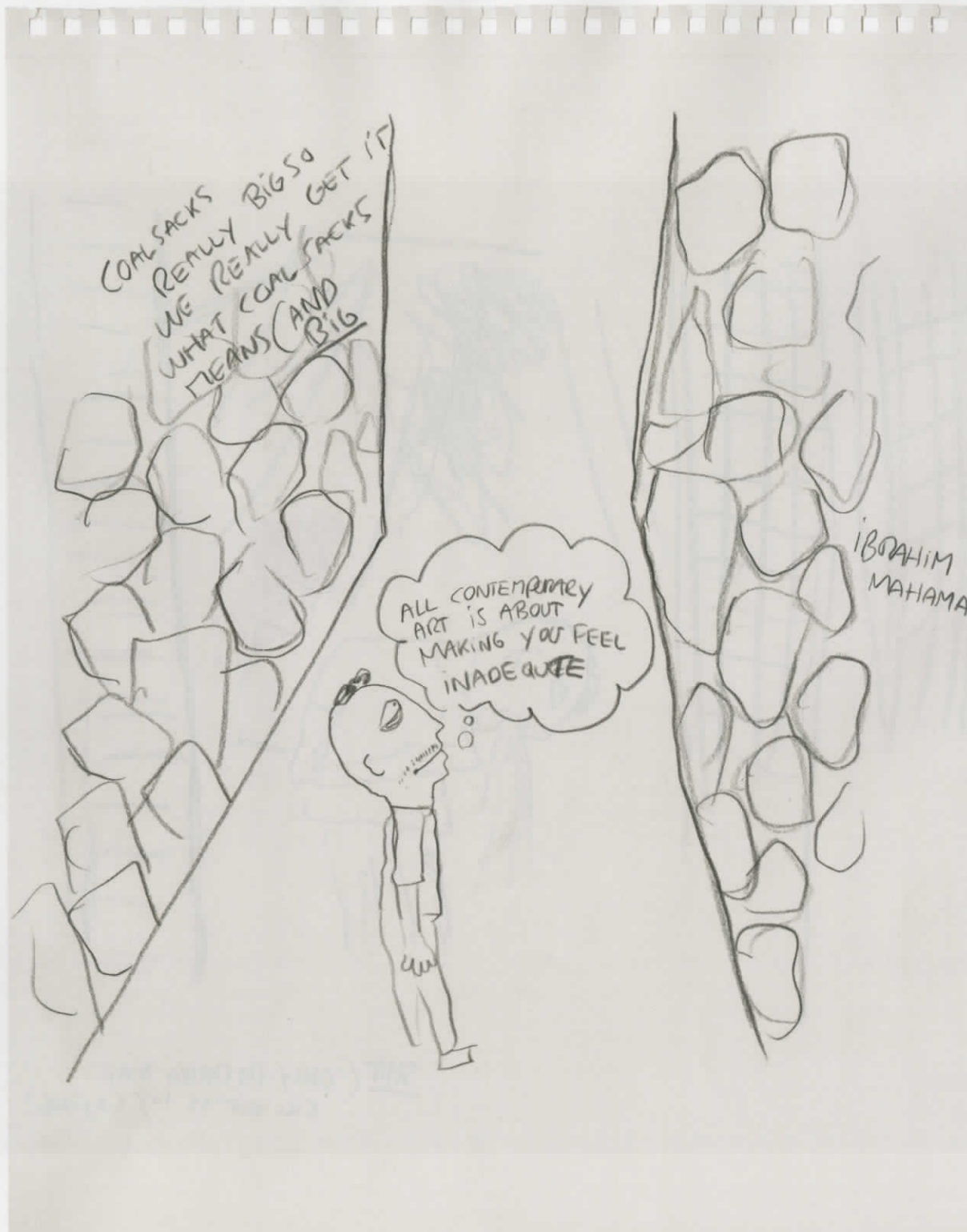
Two of Monica Bonvicini's "Latent Combustion" sculptures, 2015, chainsaws, rubber and mixed mediums. Photo Alessandra Chemollo.

Third World or politically troubled countries to draw on for a few months. There are plenty of these middlebrow efforts, then there are those that are just plain calous—such as Sonia Boyce's annoying video of people screaming, *Exquisite Cacophony* (2015)—or just plain strange: Cheb at one point found himself in a room of floor-to-ceiling Baselitz paintings. As with the Grosse, it's hard to imagine why they're here, though they serve Enwezor's decidedly masculinist agenda. (Then again, Cheb realizes later, Enwezor is the director of the Haus der Kunst in Munich. So: Grosse, Baselitz and, in the Giardini, Thomas Hirschhorn, Isa Genzken, Andreas Gursky—all instances of social curating, pushing the work of your friends.)

While the layout makes the Arsenale an ordeal to get through, there are a few small rewards scattered along the way: the always wonderful Chantal Akerman's new multichannel video installation, *Now* (2015), consisting of desertscapes shot from a fast-moving vehicle, the occasional snap of gunfire in the distance implying a nearby conflict without overwhelming us with documentary evidence; *Fara Fara* (2014), a two-channel video installation, by Carsten Höller and Måns Månsson, exploring Kinshasa's hopping music scene; and Karo Akpokiere's lively comics-style drawings exploring his own experiences as a displaced person living between Lagos and Berlin; the brilliant and witty sculptures of Eduardo Basualdo, an Argentinian artist Cheb had never heard of before, who has invented a sort of Kafka-esque minimalism. In general, though, Cheb has the impression that the middle of the Arsenale is a place reserved for the less meaty bits, which do not a good sandwich make.

The highlights of this exhibition are at the extremes. Matching the kickstart at the beginning, the end crescendos with *Passengers* (2011), the late Chris Marker's moving series of photographic portraits of people on the Paris metro. Then there's Tania Bruguera's installation, which many of Cheb's colleagues missed, he'd find out later, owing to its positioning at a remove from the Arsenale's main thoroughfare, in a cavernous room on the other side of the restaurant and bathrooms. Indeed, most of the crowds on the second day of the preview seem unaware, as there is no line before the velvet rope marking the entrance. The guard informs Cheb that photography is forbidden, as is the use of mobile phones, before opening the rope and bidding him welcome. Cheb enters the pitch-black space. Given the brightness of the Italian sun outside, the effect is one of momentary total blindness. The space is silent except for the sound of gravel beneath Cheb's feet, which he slowly drags, trying to find his bearings and figure out where to go. (Later, when reading the catalogue, Cheb will discover that the perceived gravel is actually bagasse, fibers left over from the processing of sugar cane, the chief export of Cuba, where Bruguera was born.) He discerns a tiny glow





before him up high, which he moves toward until the image becomes clear: a small monitor playing sepia-toned, slow-motion imagery of a triumphant young Fidel Castro doing his macho posturing. Cheb thinks he is alone but begins to hear a slapping sound around him that undeniably involves skin. He cannot discern the sound's source until he reaches the endpoint and is positioned just below the monitor. When his eyes adjust, he discovers four young men, naked, standing throughout the space with their heads hanging down, frantically brushing their skin as though trying to rid their bodies of filth. There in that dark space, Cheb realizes what he has been missing this whole time (besides drugs), the very thing that has been implied flauntingly throughout, only to be delivered *in flagrante* at the very end: dick.



Two sculptures by Walead Beshty, both 2013, glazed ceramic and firing plates. Photo Alessandra Chemollo.

2.

Marx, *Capital*, Volume I: "The total product of our community is a social product. One portion serves as fresh means of production and remains social. But another portion is consumed by the members as means of subsistence. A distribution of this portion amongst them is consequently necessary."

Overheard by Cheb in the Arsenale: "If on the placard, there's a gallery name beneath the title of the work and the artist's name, that means the work is definitely for sale."

THAT NIGHT, Cheb attends a dinner for the Japanese pavilion, where he is seated next to a colleague who often writes for *Artburn*, the same magazine that has sent Cheb to review the Biennale. Over dinner, they discuss that magazine's famously heavy-handed editorial policies, which, to Cheb's colleague, leave the reader with the impression that the entire book has been written by the same person. She goes on to recount a discussion she had with one of *Artburn*'s editors, who threatened to shit in her mouth if she ever wrote for a certain other art magazine. They laugh nervously, though they are both clear that he didn't exactly mean it as a joke. Again, Cheb remarks, fear: what would the information economy look like without it?

The next morning, Cheb has breakfast with an old friend from Norway who recently landed a job with that country's consulate. She regales him with stories of the night before, which she spent at the lavish dinner thrown by *Artburn*. Cheb is momentarily stunned that the magazine hadn't bothered to invite him, given that he is here *on assignment* for them, until his friend delivers a much-needed reality check. "But of course you weren't invited!" she laughs. "You're not a gallerist or a collector!" On the Grand Canal near the entrance to the Giardini, the black chrome of the Zabłudowicz

yacht glistens in the morning sun. Cheb snaps a photo with his iPhone that he uploads to his Instagram feed, with the title "BBBC (Billionaire's Big Black Cock)."

The Central Pavilion in the Giardini opens up on the theme of displacement. Big Black Canvas material has been suspended from the neoclassical facade of the building, forming a sort of curtain spectators must pass through in order to enter the exhibition; they are by Murillo, so Cheb assumes they are worth Billions. Inside, the show begins with *the end*: that is, Fabio Mauri's series of drawings of these words. They surround his installation *Il Muro Occidentale o del Pianto* (1993), a freestanding wall made out of suitcases of various materials, calling to mind the Holocaust as well as the more recent arrival of refugees' bodies on the shores of the EU. In the next room is Christian

Boltanski's *L'homme qui tousse* (1969), a disturbing film of a grotesque masked figure seated alone in a decrepit attic space retching up blood: the effect of exile on the human soul?

Perhaps responding to the more circuitous layout of the pavilion (as opposed to the open warehouse format of the Arsenale, where some architectural interference is required), the arrangement here seems inherently scattered, with each room containing its own universe, without any pretensions toward linear flow. This turns out to be a gift to the memory, as on repeated visits, Cheb can go directly to the sections he wishes to revisit: the strange pairing of Walker Evans photos with Genzken's models for unrealized public monuments (her *Deutsche Bank Proposal*, 2000, for example, is roofed with two large antennae sticking out into the heavens); Marker's 1973 film *L'Ambassade*, a docu-fiction about life inside the protective environs of an embassy where dissidents have taken shelter, in a Latin American country that has been ravaged by a coup; Marlene Dumas's skull paintings. If Parreno's flickering lights were the recurring theme of the Arsenale, then Walead Beshty's sculptures play a similar part in the Giardini, arising in two formats: shredded strips of tabloid newspapers, hate-fueled headlines sparring with centerfold tits, dangling from metallic support structures—very Cady Noland-esque—and spectacular melty ceramics. The biggest hit—throughout the preview, the screening room is consistently packed—is John Akomfrah's three-channel film *Vertigo Sea* (2015), an epic poem about that element that connects everything: water. This is one of those rare instances where looping really works—Cheb is unaware when the film begins or ends, or whether it ever does. And he doesn't care, but rather loses himself in the rapturous footage that addresses the melting of the polar ice cap, the hunting of polar bears, slavery, mass murder, dolphins, whales, effectively mirroring the ravages of time. There's also Kluge's film about capital, Isaac Julien's film about capital, then Julien's staging of readings from Marx's *Capital* . . . so much capital, so little time!

This brings us to Cheb's favorite place, the Arena, which takes up much of the center of the Giardini's main pavilion: a miniature indoor amphitheater also designed by Adjaye. Cheb enters to find the words "Evil Nigger" projected on the screen above the stage, next to which

sits the fat German gallerist staring with rapt attention at the four grand pianists bringing the klang out of the clavier for composer Julius Eastman's 1979 minimalist composition. Cheb heads up to the balcony for the second half of the concert, which consists of Eastman's *Gay Guerrilla* (1979), watching as the spectators wander in and out, take selfies, answer e-mails on their iPhones and occasionally even sit down and listen to the music.



View of Isaac Julien's performance *Das Kapital Oratorio*, 2015.
Photo Andrea Avezù.

THE ARENA, Cheb learns, will feature a continual program of talks, performances and film screenings throughout the duration of the Biennale, the lauded highlight of which is *Das Kapital Oratorio*, those readings of Marx's *Capital*, which Cheb is curious to see. That turns out to be a bit tricky though, as the program doesn't seem to be fixed. When Cheb asks one of the Arena organizers what is coming up next, after the Eastman recital, she shrugs and says she has no idea. It is Italy, after all.

And it is *Capital*, after all—or a 30-minute sliver of it. Book I, Part 3, Chapter 7 in Ben Fowkes's translation, to be precise, read in part by two performers. Unsurprisingly, the room clears minutes into the reading. *Capital's* density and difficulty are legendary; the inherent impossibility of the project was directly experienced by Marx himself, one might fathom, as he was unable to finish writing it. Cheb decides to tough it out; rather than attempt the impracticable task of comprehending the content of a spitfire rendition of a work that is really not meant to be read but studied, he closes his eyes and transmutes the words into a flow of poetry: labor bleeding into objects; labor itself a product, a raw material; labor being time, the flow of time funneling into objects . . .

Considering the prominence given to *Capital*, Cheb wonders whether either Enwezor or Julien have actually read all three volumes of Marx's chief oeuvre. If so, they are among the very few people who have. *The Communist Manifesto*, cowritten with Friedrich Engels, on the other hand, could be seen as a distillation of *Capital's* most pressing analyses, spotlighting its central polemic in less than a hundred pages, making it more readily digestible for a non-scholarly crowd—or, more pivotally in the context of the Biennale, an audience that does not necessarily have the luxury of time. Why, then, choose *Capital* over the *Manifesto* if indeed what you wish to highlight is the content, rather than the mere reference, the signifier; if you really want to communicate a message about how *value* comes into being, and how it is deployed systematically as a tool for oppressing “the People,” as opposed to the people Cheb finds himself surrounded by at the invite-only preview of the Venice Biennale, people who stand to benefit the most from capital and therefore prefer to keep their inquiries in the safe zone of the theoretical? Perhaps the “epic duration” that Enwezor's second “filter” refers to is the burden of empathy—with those subject to exploitive, monotonous, confining labor—that Cheb and his colleagues are meant to be reminded of, and submit to, while seated in this air-conditioned enclave, Marx's words *filtered* through

the glow of iPhone screens displaying the evening's party invites.

PERHAPS THESE issues would be hashed out in greater detail at the party for Julien. Sadly, Cheb would not get a chance to find out, though he wonders if Julien is at all bothered by the fact that Rolls Royce is throwing the party. On his way back to the bed-and-breakfast, Cheb bumps into Renzo Martens outside the Dutch pavilion. Martens is an artist Cheb has limitless respect for. His position is simple: political art, so-called, is too often

the mere gesturing of armchair philosophers. Specifically, art about the oppressed and impoverished never really aids the subjects it purports to address; instead, its effects—namely the generation of capital—merely benefit the locales where they are shown (such as Venice). For the past few years, he has been using the much maligned neoliberal tool of gentrification subversively in an effort to build a contemporary art center on a former Unilever plantation in the Congo, providing one of the world's poorest communities with a means of sustenance by actively marketing the work of artists there and developing a local art-world infrastructure. Surely this is a project that Enwezor would want to stand behind. But no. Martens is in Venice, he says, only to raise funds for the project. When Cheb registers his surprise that he hasn't been included in Enwezor's show, Martens just shrugs. “The exhibition is great. If you have \$2,000 to spend on flights and hotels,” he says, gesturing at a group of art-world professionals taking a group portrait with a selfie stick in front of Murillo's oil flags, “you can come to Venice and learn about economic inequality.”

Cheb wonders how much the people he is surrounded by have learned. Then he wonders where they have come from and where they will go next, now that the next big art spectacle is an entire month away. Going everywhere, all at once, all the time, seeing the exact same people, one really ends up nowhere. Even Enwezor's political correctness has its limits; after all, there are zero displays of blatant ass-banditry. (I.e., what about the *bodily* shapes/manifestations of commodities that Marx often hints at throughout *Capital*? The *expression* of value, which must necessarily be considered in relation to the body, and its—erstwhile deviant—processes?) Although Enwezor has allowed Mark Nash, Julien's long-time partner, to lend a helping hand with the curation of the Arena, Cheb wonders whether Julien ever feels the need to butch it up when meeting with Enwezor, much as Cheb often feels compelled to do when traveling in Latin America or the Middle East or Africa or Russia . . . well, whenever he is anywhere in the three-quarters of the world where the entire country's population hasn't been “gently prodded” into bending over to take it doggie-style from Euro-American neoliberalism. Outside the Giardini, he studies a poster advertising the Copenhagen Biennial. It shows a tent on which are spray-painted the words, “Now Is Now.” Cheb squints thoughtfully, then gives up. The work is untitled, the location cannot be discerned. ○

BLOOD AND

REFUSE

GOD TALKING ABOUT
MARX IN A CONTEXT
WERE EVERYTHING IS JUST
ABOUT HOW TO MAKE
AS MUCH FUCKING
MONEY AS POSSIBLE?

DAS KAPITAL ORATORIO

THOUGH
VENICE WAS
ABOUT THE
PARTY?

