

Most Serene Republic of Venice

Fay Nicolson

*In Venice they do let heaven see the pranks
They dare not show their husbands; their best conscience
Is not to leave't undone, but keep't unknown. (1)*

Commissioned by a-n on occasion
of the Venice Biennale 2015



Time freezes, then melts. The medieval warrens
barricading against the plundering Goths and Barbarians.
Sedimented layers of accumulated culture, appropriated,
re-appropriated, compacted, ossified like the four-meter
wooden stakes that keep the city afloat.

Floating City
City of Masks
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Giovanni Battista Tiepolo, 'Neptune Offering Gifts to Venice', 1740

Let's talk about form, let's talk about context.

What keeps it apart keeps it powerful. To control the waters is to control the flow of trade, the exchange of goods, people, capital. To control the channels, the networks, is to control the flow information, the exchange of data, services, capital. We cannot ignore the context of Venice and separate it from the Art it hosts. The tourism, the wealth, the carnival wraps around the notion of 'exhibition' and the very possibility and privilege of engaging in such activity.

The Devil's Mill

An attitude of nonchalant indifference to the passage of time which no-one dreams of mastering, using up or saving... Haste is seen as a lack of decorum combined with diabolical ambition' (2)

We march through the Campo la de Guerra, down the Merceria Orologio and rush into Piazza San Marco. Late for the launch, late for the opening, late for the tour, late for the breakfast, brunch and lunch. A scattering of flyers, stray footsteps, following the ghost of Better-Times-To-Be-Had, Better-Places-To-Be.



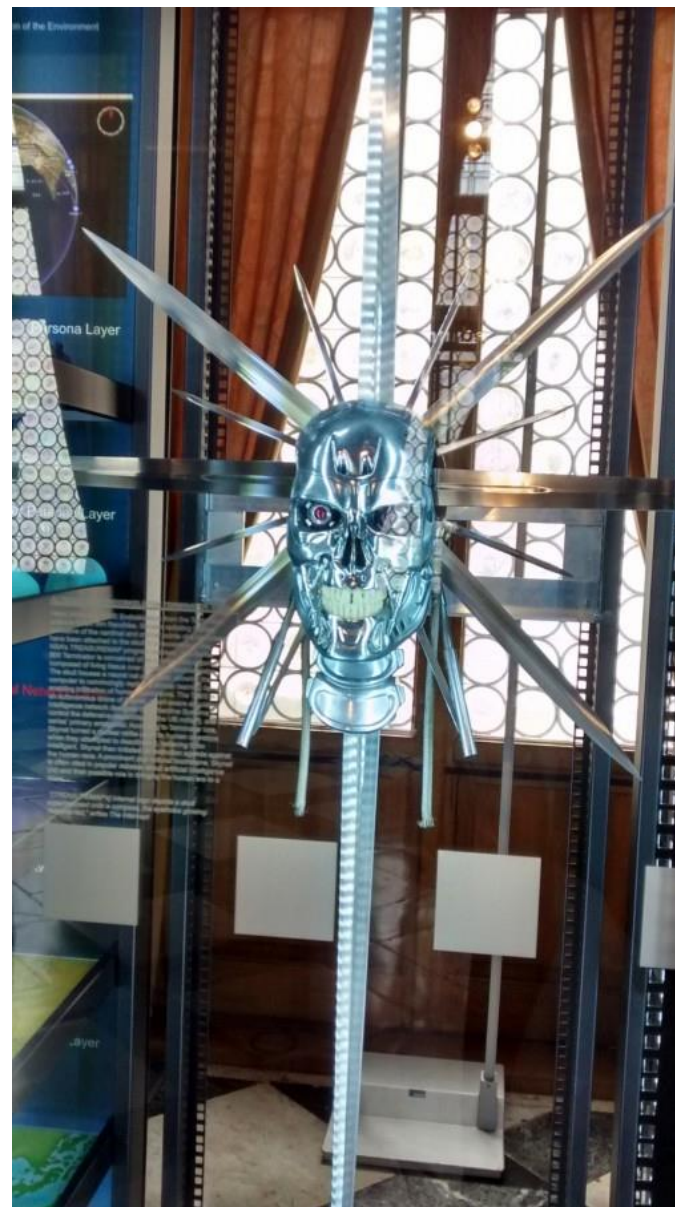


Venice, a merchant city, Audemars Piguet, Candy Floss, Rolex, Selfie Stick. Empty shop fronts of high-end stores, bored be-suited workers stare out onto tired T-shirted workers, hawking, trawling. Eight-hour shifts, work time, leisure time. The watch is the sun and the moon. It is the world tied to your wrist, the world has a face, arms and hands.



Into the New Zealand Pavilion just off Piazza San Marco. The ornate interior is joyous, pompous, overbearing. On the way into Simon Denny's exhibition, we pass a Mappa Mundi. Land masses swell and coagulate like bruises swimming in a pool. The world, our experience and understanding of it flattened into this disk, this territory.

With synthetic wit, Simon Denny reminds us we are subjects in this maze of networks, watching and being watched. Waterways are now wireless. Here is anywhere, everywhere. Navy. NSA.





In my home town of Derby in 1996 CORE design created Tomb Raider. I sat at home in Derby playing Tomb Raider II, trapped on the alleys and bridges of Venice with my hot pants and my Uzis.



This game forms my first experience of navigating the city of Venice; climbing walls, leaping from balconies, commandeering speed boats. Past the Arsenale, need more ammo.



Hito Steyerl, factory of the Sun, 2015

You are playing a video game. You (the Viewer) are the Gamer, the Actor; the Agent of Action. In Hito Steyerl's *Factory of the Sun* we descend into the hot basement of the German Pavilion. Like her protagonists, we are trapped in a Motion Capture studio. Fast paced, liquid edits, shattering, gold. We cannot run fast enough, dance hard enough, to keep up. Her characters are slave labourers clad in gold Lycra. They dance on the roof of a fictional NSA headquarters against a decaying backdrop of structures fashioned into a colossal cock and balls. High end production, slick shining virtuosity. Our job is to produce light; an immaterial energy, is it invaluable?



Joan Jonas, American Pavilion, 2015

Into the USA Pavilion, Joan Jonas takes us back to low production. To childhood, to oneiric sequences of overlaid projections, paper, play. Wondering through the darkness we encounter small stages presenting dreamy scenarios; slow moving tableaux of children in front of infinity backgrounds. Dunce hats, kites, bundles of found wood. The edges of the studio collapse. Knowledge and structure sink into another way of finding and making meaning. We are lulled by the ever-present anticipation of Nature, of Forest, Myth and Lore. The bestial fantasies of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. The Forest as metaphorical setting for transgression and transfiguration. The Forest as antithesis to The Court and all the Order, Hierarchy, Commerce and Convention it preserves.



Map of the Giardini, Venice

The garden is the smallest parcel of the world and then it is the totality of the world. (3)

A bad trip through the global garden. The ideological and the idiosyncratic play of Pavilion architecture. International Styles. We mount the avenue, crunching gravel under our sandals, thrash metal pours from the launch of the British Pavilion. We are here, but where are we? I am in Switzerland, Denmark and Venezuela. I am in Russia, Japan and Korea. I approach the classical facade of the British Pavilion, staring down on the procession like an arbiter of all things powerful, tasteful, civil. The Empire. To the right we have Germany, to the left France.

The garden has been a sort of happy, universalizing heterotopia since the beginnings of antiquity (3)

The Garden is a map big enough to inhabit. Let's take a stroll. Each Nation State a Pavilion. What is a Pavilion? Wikipedia tells me it's a free-standing structure whose architecture makes it an object of pleasure. The world and his wife are out today at the Zoo, penguins replaced by collectors. Global theme park. Queuing for Nemesis. We duck into these pleasure structures, standing free, taking in works, evaluating connections. Some Pavilions wrestle with their entanglement in this Heterotopic schema and their implication in the inequality of global trade and power. Should they turn uncomfortably, red faced in their dens? Does this balance history? Overwrite it? I am here. But where am I?

The Giardini is heterotopic and heterochronic.
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News, lads! our wars are done.
The desperate tempest hath so bang'd the Turks,
That their designment halts: a noble ship of Venice
Hath seen a grievous wreck and sufferance
On most part of their fleet. (1)

Back at home the Venice Biennale becomes a place.
The people I return to tell me about initial reviews and
sharp commentaries. They show me photos of the rich
collectors that fell into the canal. The 1% fall over too. The
bridges collapse. Soggy Balenciaga. Under Water Rolex.
The reality of Venice filtered through news and reviews,
through authoritative channels. The art without thirst and
blisters. The place without a sense of placeless-less.



*My money is almost spent; I have been to-night
exceedingly well cudgelled;
and I think the issue will be, I shall have so much
experience for my pains, and so, with no money at all
and a little more wit, return again to Venice. (1)*

- (1) *Shakespeare's Othello*, 1565
<http://shakespeare.mit.edu/othello/full.html>
- (2) *Pierre Bourdieu* quoted in E.P. Thompson's *'Time, Work-Discipline and Industrial Capitalism*, 1967
<https://libcom.org/files/timeworkandindustrialcapitalism.pdf>
- (3) *Of Other Spaces: Utopias and Heterotopias*, Michel Foucault, 1967. <http://web.mit.edu/allanmc/www/foucault1.pdf>