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A Year Full of Shadows

From Anthropocenic doom in Cecilia Alemani's Italian Pavilion in Venice to Alvin Lucier's *I Am Sitting in a Room* at d14

BY BARBARA CASAVECCHIA

2017 has provided so many occasions for feeling lost and for so much fumbling in the dark, that perhaps it's not surprising that the artworks that have meant the most to me are full of shadows. So, in no particular order ...



Roberto Cuoghi, Italian Pavilion,
Arsenale, 57th Venice Biennale.
Courtesy: La Biennale di Venezia;
photograph: Italo Rondinella

The Italian Pavilion at the 57th Venice Biennale, curated by Cecilia Alemani, was titled 'Il Mondo Magico' (Magic World), after the eponymous 1948 book by ethnographer Ernesto De Martino on the role of the irrational within a culture in moments of crisis. As the embodiment of our Anthropocenic doom, it was – finally – a strong presentation for the Italian pavilion, with new site-specific projects by Giorgio Andreotta Calò, Roberto Cuoghi, and Adelita Husni-Bey. Cuoghi's DIY religious icons, fabricated in situ and left to rot under the public gaze, were a powerful reflection on the current circulation, use and rapid decay of 'cult' images, as well as on the constant shape-shifting of faiths, secular and otherwise. Andreotta Calò created, by means of a giant reflection on a pool of dark water, a ghost image of Venice and its disappearance, while Husni-Bey's video is a study of a group of teenagers who the artist asked to play with a set of invented tarot cards in order to articulate their thoughts on collective trauma, climate

change, political resistance and the role of the imagination.

Read Jennifer Higgie on the highlights of the Arsenale pavilions at this year's Venice Biennale

<<https://frieze.com/article/57th-venice-biennale-arsenale-pavilions>>

For her first solo show at Clima gallery in Milan, 'Calipso', Cleo Fariselli presented a series of heads (*Gran Papa*, 2016) that she had modelled 'in negative', i.e. by inserting her hands into a block of fresh clay and sculpting remembered facial features by subtracting matter. She then filled the void with white ceramic dental plaster, so that the surface of each work is marked by imprints of her fingers, nails and skin. The result is hauntingly seductive and would be perfectly at home in the computer vision programme DeepDream.



Diego Marcon, *Monelle*, 2017, 35mm film still. Courtesy: the artist

Along with the duo Invernomuto and Talia Chetrit, Diego Marcon is one of the three finalists of the 2018 MAXXI Bulgari Prize (the winner will be announced in October 2018) and his new 35mm film, *Monelle* (2017) really scared me when I first saw it over summer in his studio. Projected in Vienna in September in the group show 'Live End Dream No', curated by Eva Fabbris at Galerie Steinek, it was filmed inside the infamous Casa del Fascio, the headquarters of the local Fascist Party in Como, designed by Giuseppe Terragni (1932-36). The building is immersed in the dark, so that it's hard to recognise its iconic architecture. It appears to be inhabited by uncanny female presences, revealed only by rapid flashes of

light: they are CGI-generated, but the human eye does not have enough time to register their falsity. They materialize and disappear in a blink, like ghosts, or frightening skeletons in the closet.



Elisa Caldana and Diego Tonus, *Topography of Terror (19.12.2016)*, 2017, video still. Courtesy: the artists and ar/ge kunst, Bolzano

Horror is at the core of the new, stunning film *Topography of Terror (19.12.2016)* (2017), by Elisa Caldana and Diego Tonus, which debuted in September at ar/ge kunst (the city's small kunstverein) in Bolzano, in a solo show curated by Emanuele Guidi. Set in a CGI-rendering of the unrealized building by Swiss architect Peter Zumthor from the early 1990s on the site of the Gestapo headquarters at the 'Topographie des Terror' in Berlin, the plot follows the story – narrated in voiceover and based on real conversations with journalists from the BBC and Reuters – of a reporter suffering from post-traumatic stress because of overexposure to images that are too violent and too graphic to be shared with the public. Chilling.



Yuri Ancarani, *The Challenge*, 2016, film still. Courtesy: Slingshot Films

The Challenge (2016), Yuri Ancarani's first feature film, was awarded the Prix Spécial du Jury 'Ciné +Cinéastes du présent' at the 2016 Locarno Film Festival; it was later screened at the Biennale de l'Image en Mouvement of Geneva, where I saw it in January. Shot in Qatar over three years, its focus is a falconry tournament in the desert; it features a group of wealthy sheiks, who consider the birds of prey to be cultural assets like sports cars, flash motorbikes, drones, giant plasma screens and hi-tech phones. There is almost no dialogue, but the great soundtrack by Lorenzo Senni and Francesco Fantini adds to the mood of an epic battle between old and new rituals, or, perhaps more accurately, between reality and its cash-infused, rapacious alternative.

Alvin Lucier: I am sitting in a room (1969)



It was in Athens, finally, that I came across a work I couldn't stop thinking about: Alvin Lucier's *I Am Sitting in a Room* (1969), which was performed in April during the opening week of documenta 14. On that night, like hundreds of other people, I sat in silence in the dark on the steps of the underground brutalist amphitheatre of the Odeion (Conservatory). When the octogenarian artist finally walked in, he quietly sat down and said into his microphone: 'I am sitting in a room, the same one you are in now. I am recording the sound of my speaking voice.' His amplified words, reverberated by the space, were immediately recorded and then played again, re-refracted and re-recorded, like a mantra, for over a half hour. The architectural structure worked as a sound box, so that only certain frequencies emerged, like waves lapping the shore. Each time Lucier's utterance was repeated it lost definition and edge, like a file reproduced too many times, until Lucier himself became inaudible. It was moving because the dissolution of human expression, over the course of time, is inevitable. And it marked a magic moment of suspension, devoted to the act of listening, eyes shut, as opposed to the compulsion of seeing everything that had ruled the day.

Read Harry Thorne's review of the Athens Conservatoire from our series of reports from
<<https://frieze.com/article/documenta-14-athens-conservatoire>> **documenta 14,**
<<https://frieze.com/article/documenta-14-athens-conservatoire>> **Athens**
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To me, Lucier's piece came to embody a reflection on the rhythm of our infosphere. Algorithmic pacing and the urge to constantly feed the 'feeds' has led to an acceleration of stimulus and response mechanisms, snap judgments, gut feelings, instant likes and dislikes, all amplified and yet fractured and abridged whenever they're reposted from a platform to another, from one echo chamber to another. How does the compulsion to respond to public comments within minutes emotionally impact on our ways of communicating – art writing included – and how much anger and frustration are an enforced performativity, an exasperated rhythm of consumption and release?

Bear with me, I behave in the same way and suffer from the same symptoms. My resolution for the new year is optimistically naïve: find a cure.

Main image: Alvin Lucier performing Sferics, 1981, sound installation and recordings of ionospheric disturbances for large-loop antennas, tape recorder and playback system, Middletown, Connecticut, late 1980s, courtesy: the artist and Tilton Gallery, New York

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