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56th Venice Biennale

VARIOUS VENUES, ITALY

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ALL THE WORLD'S FUTURES

In a 2009 conversation with jazz pianist Jason Moran, Glenn Ligon, a New York artist who often includes quoted text in his work, spoke about his interest in testing ideas outside the safe habitat of the studio. 'How do you experiment in public?' he wondered. Ligon's four, black, text-based silkscreen paintings, 'Come Out #12–#15' (2015), served as a kind of fulcrum for 'All the World's Futures', curator Okwui Enwezor's sometimes brutal but ultimately engaging keynote exhibition at the 56th Venice Biennale. 'How,' continuedLigon, 'do you let an audience in on this process of learning about something?' He did not propose an answer, which is fine: it is his question that matters. It offers a way to think about Enwezor's interest in essaying 'the current disquiet of our time', as he put it in a pre-opening statement. How do you create an exhibition that is essentially an experiment in social analysis? How, to extend on this, do you engage an art audience with an experiment grounded in political theory, in particular that of Karl Marx, one of the most rigorous critics of 19th-century imperial Britain? The answer? Not easily.

Enwezor's starting point is, at least, uncontroversial. Like his predecessors, he filled the catacombs of the Giardini and Arsenale with a worldly collection of things: sculptures, paintings, drawings, photographs, films and installations representing the labour of 136 artists from 53 countries. 'All the World's Futures' is an obese monster: in his role as artistic director, Enwezor has adopted a methodology that is closer to that of a Marxist theatre director than a museum curator. Like Bertolt Brecht, that champion of critical estrangement, Enwezor's self-styled 'iterative choreography' services two ends: a description of current artistic practices and the formulation of a kind of live or organic theory around these objects. As an addendum to his montage of socially engaged practices, Enwezor is using 'All the World's Futures' as a laboratory for ongoing research. As you read this, Marx's three-part volume *Das Kapital* (Capital, 1887) is being read out loud in the ARENA, a purpose-designed auditorium inside the Central Pavilion. Here, a priestly cast of Marxist interpreters is recapitulating the meaning and application of words like 'commodity' and 'use value' (not without self-aware humour: 'Materialism is materialism,' sighed Adrian Piper, winner of the Golden Lion for Best Artist, during one such talk).

Like *Capital*, Enwezor's exhibition is hard work. Partly, this has to do with its scale, but also the way it skitters between high conceptualism and straightforward reportage. I took heart from Robert Smithson's advice to his wife, Nancy Holt, as they pushed through a marshland while making their six-minute film *Swamp* (1971), on view in the Giardini: 'Straight in, just go right in.' Smithson's counsel was useful, too, in negotiating Ligon's 'Come Out' paintings. Installed in an adjacent room to Piper's *Everything #21*

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Jason Moran & Alicia Hall Moran
Work Songs, 2015, performance in the ARENA, Central Pavilion, Giardini

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Exterior view of the Central Pavilion, Giardini, above: Glenn Ligon, *A Small Band*, 2015, below: Oscar Murillo, *Signalling Devices in Now Bastard Territory*, 2015

3
Ibrahim Mahama
Out of Bounds, 2014–15, installation view outside of the Arsenale, 2015

(2010–13) – a wonderfully recondite installation composed of four blackboards covered Bart Simpson-style with the same sentence ('Everything will be taken away') in white chalk – Ligon's work recalls a violent incident in New York from 1964.

In April that year, teenager Daniel Hamm experienced 'the thunder and fire of the billy club', as James Baldwin would write in *The Nation* two years later, when he tried to stop a policeman from shooting children at a Harlem fruit stand. Hamm was arrested and severely beaten. He later told how he had to open a bruise on his leg to prove the extent of his injuries. His testimony formed the basis of a tape loop composition by composer Steve Reich. Titled *Come Out* (1966), it repeats Hamm's phrase 'come out to show them', which are also the words screenprinted in layers across Ligon's painting in black san-serif lettering.

Colour is an important signification device, not only for the artist but for Enwezor, too. The dominant colour palette of the curator's imperial disquisition on sovereignty is black. It is signalled even before one enters the Central Pavilion, in 20 oil-stained pseudo flags that hang like rags at its entrance. Produced by the Colombian-born, London-based artist Oscar Murillo and entitled *Signalling Devices in Now Bastard Territory* (2015), they correspond with a similarly arresting intervention by Ghanaian artist Ibrahim Mahama, whose vast tapestry of used coals sacks, *Out of Bounds* (2014–15), hang on both sides of the service passage flanking the Arsenale.

Black is a bountiful colour. It saturates the banners of pirates, anarchists and Islamic State fighters, and characterizes the wardrobe of romantics. It is the colour of mourning, which one hears abundantly in the aching timbre of the unseen blues singer inside the murky ruins of St Laurence, a now-demolished Romanesque revival brick church in Chicago that features as the setting for *Gone Are the Days of Shelter and Martyr* (2014). Along with John Akomfrah's three-channel film, *Vertigo Sea* (2015), a bountiful meditation on the bio-politics of the sea, this elegiac film installation by Theaster Gates stood out amongst the numerous films in 'All the World's Futures'. This is largely because of they the way they essay disquiet. Take Gate's work. The church, which serviced mostly African-American parishioners, closed in 2002 due to dwindling membership and unserviceable debts. Despite its fond associations amongst the Dorchester Avenue community, the disused building, which lent some of its fixtures to Gates's installation, came to be viewed as a 'black hole'. None of this back story is directly essayed in the work: black is also silence.

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In two untitled figure studies from 2015, Kerry James Marshall explores another aspect of black's multivalent meanings. Juxtaposed against three abstract paintings composed of blots of acrylic green and pink, Marshall's exaggeratedly black figures – alone and in embrace – reminded me of novelist Teju Cole's thoughtful analysis in a 2015 essay published in *The New York Times* on photographer Roy DeCarava: 'Instead of trying to brighten blackness, he went against expectation and darkened it further. What is dark is neither blank nor empty.' Black is a remedial to blankness , but not the only colour to fix an idea, as Egyptian painter and activist Inji Efflatoun's devastatingly godd oil works in hot orange and desert yellows prove. Black the colour of ink, of our post-Gutenberg knowledge systems. Enwezor's project as a curator is grounded in a literary sensibility. His choices for 'All the World's Futures' often underscore the vital intersection of image and text. Sometimes delightfully, particularly in Malawi-born Londoner Samson Kambalu's *Nyau Cinema* (2012–15), rule-bound film works that purposefully deploy primitive cinematic techniques. Pleasure is at a far remove from Taryn Simon's investigation of biology and the ceremony of power, in her austere photographic installation *Paperwork, and the Will of Capital* (2015). But Simon's labour-intensive approach enacts a key conceptual premise of Enwezor's show: the artist as meta-journalist.

On one level, it is possible to read 'All the World's Futures' as an artist-written diagnosis of the world. There is risk in this strategy. For example, Hiwa K's *The Bell* (2007–15) is a fascinating study of conflict, partly told through a scrapyard in northern Iraq, but as a piece of journalism it is unreliable. Ditto Enwezor's exhibition. 'There is no straightforward road from the fact of looking at a spectacle to the fact of understanding the state of the world,' offers Jacques Rancière in *The Emancipated Spectator* (2009); 'no direct road from intellectual awareness to political action.' I seriously doubt, though, that Enwezor wants to transform his viewers into the banner-waving protestors depicted in Rirkrit Tiravanija's 'Demonstration Drawings' from 2007 and 2015, dull works produced by commissioned Thai artists that affirm Google's abundant image archive and little else. Rather, I suspect his ideas are synchronous with those of Chris Marker, represented in the exhibition by 134 photo portraits of Parisian metro commuters, 'Passengers' (2011). 'What interests me is history,' offered Marker in 2003, 'and politics interests me only to the degree that it represents the mark history makes on the present.' Enwezor's show is a worldly and confident explication of this attitude, but one that sometimes tips over into becoming affectless and deterministic in its essaying of the state of things.

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