

May You Live In Interesting Times

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A note on the title

This exhibition takes its title from a fictitious proverb with a strangely persistent history. For over 80 years, well-known authors and politicians in the West (ranging from Arthur C. Clarke to Hillary Rodham Clinton) have made reference to this phrase as being an "ancient Chinese curse".¹

But there never was any such curse in China. Instead this phrase is an ersatz cultural relic, another 'Orientalism' fashioned in the Occident. Yet for all its fictional status it has had real rhetorical effects in significant public exchanges. At once suspect and rich in meaning, this phrase suggests potential lines of exploration that seem worth pursuing in an exhibition, especially at a moment when the digital dissemination of 'fake news' is corroding public discourse and the trust on which it depends. At the same time, it is my hope that art can give us tools to reimagine the possibilities of these 'interesting times' in which we live today, and so transform this phrase from a curse into a challenge that we can enthusiastically embrace.

An exhibition with two propositions

From the acceleration of climate change to the growing disparity of wealth in nations, contemporary matters of concern are

addressed in many of the works in this exhibition. But let us acknowledge at the outset that art is more than a document of its times. Indeed, how can an artist even draw conclusions about the moment in which we live when – as art historian Henri Focillon pointed out some 80 years ago – our era is "neither single nor homogenous" and encompasses "the most diverse images, the most flagrant contradictions?"²

In contrast to journalism or historical reportage, art articulates a difference from the texture of facts; as contemporary philosopher Marcus Steinweg has noted, it affirms this difference as an assertion of form. *May You Live In Interesting Times* highlights artworks whose forms function in part to call attention to what forms conceal and the multifarious purposes that they fulfil. The artists in this exhibition, in other words, fashion forms whose specific character and delineation raise questions about the ways in which we currently mark particular cultural boundaries and borders.

In an indirect manner, then, perhaps these artworks can serve as a kind of guide for how to live and think in 'interesting times'. They challenge existing habits of thought and open up our readings of widely varied objects and pictures, scenarios and situations. Their capacity to do so grows out of a practice of entertaining multiple perspectives and juggling diverse ways of making sense of the world. Animated by urgent (rather than idle)

curiosity, the works in this exhibition invite us to consider unfamiliar vantage points, and to discern the ways in which 'order' has become the simultaneous presence of diverse orders. Artists who think in this manner offer alternatives to the meaning of so-called facts by suggesting other ways of connecting them. In this polarised age when popular communication platforms favour ever more reductive memes and the bandwidths of public discourse have grown increasingly narrow, *May You Live In Interesting Times* seeks to foreground ways in which art's complexity, its signals riddled with contradictions and ambivalence, can illuminate aspects of our current social relations and psyches.

Among their other outstanding qualities, the contributors to this exhibition are distinguished by the adventurousness with which they embrace and experiment with highly varied approaches to making art. They each produce sundry bodies of work that articulate distinct modes of thinking and engage far-ranging sets of concerns. Not only do they make individual artworks that are multivalent, in other words, but they do so in diverse ways, often working through the filters of varied subjectivities.

Thus Jean-Luc Moulène describes his practice like this: "I don't have a typical way in which I act. I'm interested in standard variations but not in being typical. I am always doing group shows alone, because me and we are actually millions..."³

In order to call attention to the exemplary multiplicity of these artistic practices, I have made a small adjustment to this Biennale's usual format by dividing it into two separate presentations, *Proposition A* in the Arsenale and *Proposition B* in the Giardini's Central Pavilion. The works presented in these two venues, and the atmospheres they generate, are quite distinct from each other – not because they are grouped around separate ideas or principles, but because they feature different aspects of each artist's practice. Visitors who do not routinely trouble themselves with reading introductory texts and wall labels might never even imagine that these two exhibitions were made by the same artists. The fact that they were is precisely the point, as the goal here is to provide a more expansive sense of each artist's work, and to give audiences a chance to read one type of work in the light of the other.

The real purpose of art

One of the broad assumptions underlying this exhibition is that works of art are never reducible to being 'about' a particular issue or subject. Art is not a message that we can simply decipher and comprehend; indeed, interesting artworks do not offer us conclusions so much as deeply engaging points of departure. They provide unexpected

pleasures and a residual sense of surprise and uncertainty; we might end up feeling that we simultaneously understand and do not understand them. If a work is complex enough, we may never fully resolve our relations with it.

Ian Cheng, among other artists in this exhibition, has objected to the idea that art should bear the burden of being 'meaningful'. "I think this is a misunderstanding", he has observed: "Maybe the real purpose of art is to wrestle with the relationship between meaning and meaninglessness and how they transform each other".⁴

Another way of saying this might be that artists constantly question the boundaries that separate what is deemed culturally significant and what is not, what we pay attention to and what we ignore. Artists remix existing cultural signal-to-noise ratios so that new information - and new ways of thinking - can emerge from the background and be brought into focus.

Alluding to this pivotal play between meaning and meaninglessness, the philosopher Cornelius Castoriadis remarked that the arts are simultaneously "a window opened onto chaos and a form forced upon its shapeless flux. It is in the substance of all great art that from behind every form it conjures up, the boundless chaos of being winks...".⁵ This underlying tension, Castoriadis insisted, is what gives art its power to challenge our belief in established truths and the conventions that frame them.

In his ground-breaking book *The Open Work*, first published in Italy in 1962, Umberto Eco drew attention to art's capacity to inspire novel ways of seeing and behaving. As Eco declared, "Here is a culture [the culture of fine art] that allows for different methods of research not because they might come up with identical results but because they contradict and complement each other in a dialectic opposition that will generate new perspectives...".⁶ Almost 60 years after the publication of Eco's book, it is precisely these characteristics of "the open work" that this exhibition aims to explore through the work of the artists that it brings together.

Taking nothing for granted, these artists have fashioned ways of making art that are essentially inquisitive, speculative and exploratory. For Avery Singer, painting involves "constantly planting a philosophical investigation into its own status, prompting a continual investigation into what it means to be a subject".⁷ Speaking of his own practice in a manner that rings true for many of his fellow contributors to *May You Live In Interesting Times*, Kemang Wa Lehulere has stated that he is "interested in blurring the boundaries between what is considered making art, what is art, what an artist is, can be or should be, has been, will be, in the same way that I find and look at time as elastic, that is, not something that can be stratified between the past, present, and future...".⁸

May You Live In Interesting Times celebrates artists who operate in the spaces

in between our customary categories. Their work often involves straddling or conflating different genres, conventions and imagery from seemingly unrelated cultural or aesthetic arenas. This approach is in part a strategy used to highlight the limits of those categories with which we order and shape our view of the world. As an example, consider Julie Mehretu's large canvases that are displayed in the Central Pavilion: these pictures mix up the swirling pictorial rhythms of gestural abstraction with ghostly traces of real-world disturbances. The artist made them by painting over a ground of photographic images that depict conflagrations, right-wing demonstrations and counter-protests. From a distance their multi-layered surfaces engage us as an innocent kind of abstract painting, but on closer inspection our frame of reference is abruptly derailed as we notice fragments of gestures and bodies reminiscent of scenes from the news. Abstraction is cannily made to appear here not as an art of pure surface but as a bearer of memories and testament to the struggles of the artist's time. "I am looking for that space where you can't have that singular, particular experience," Mehretu has remarked. "It's about what is undefined, unstable - and for me, that's important politically. There is always a multitude of ways of seeing."⁹

Art in a post-truth era

*Artists are here to disturb the peace.*¹⁰

JAMES BALDWIN

There is yet another motive for the split format of *May You Live In Interesting Times*: it is intended to evoke the parallel information landscapes that define our increasingly polarised public discourse. This phenomenon is exemplified by the term "alternative facts", first used by Counsellor to the US President Kellyanne Conway in her defence of the Trump administration's bogus claims about the size of the audience for President Trump's inauguration.¹¹ For several media commentators, Conway's phrase called to mind the dystopian social landscape of George Orwell's novel *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, where government-enforced "doublethink" required "holding two contradictory beliefs in one's mind simultaneously, and accepting both of them".¹²

Anticipating our post-truth turn in his 2014 essay *Why has Critique Run Out of Steam?* French sociologist Bruno Latour wrote about the way that conservatives had begun discrediting the phenomenon of global warming by citing a lack of scientific certainty about its existence. Latour, who had spent much of his academic career debunking the rhetoric of certainty employed by scientists, conceded that his own post-structuralist toolkit had been appropriated

by climate change deniers as well as other politically-motivated 'revisionists'. Latour concluded his essay by proposing that under the present circumstances, a new critical approach was required that would be less corrosive and divisive.

May You Live In Interesting Times includes work by a number of artists who take up this matter of concern. The group Slavs and Tatars have suggested one possible alternative model for how artists might critically engage with their subjects: "A very important thing in art is to disrespect and respect at the same time. In order to disrespect your source, you have to respect it – you have to be familiar. The Western idea of criticism is always from a distance. But there's a way of critiquing through complete intimacy. Imagine critiquing something through a bear hug."¹³

Some leitmotifs – the other side of the wall

In his speculative novel *The City & the City* (2009), China Miéville borrowed a concept from theoretical physics in fashioning a fiction about two cities that occupy the same physical space, but whose respective citizens are forbidden to interact or even acknowledge one another. Through long custom, as well as strict policing, each population has learned to 'unsee' their neighbours, as if they were divided by invisible walls. It is a scenario that

pointedly calls to mind the way that most urbanites routinely ignore various realities of where they live. Miéville's fiction pointedly suggests that the bubble worlds in which we choose to live, and which separate us from others, are predicated on denial.

From Andreas Lolis's carved marble sculptures of objects that conjure the lives of Athens's burgeoning homeless population to Soham Gupta's startlingly empathic portraits of individuals living on the streets of Kolkata, *May You Live In Interesting Times* features a range of artworks that breach this wall of denial. From Anthony Hernandez's haunting photographs of abandoned developments lying in ruin outside Rome to Teresa Margolles's presentation of a 12-metre-long cinderblock wall from Ciudad Juárez, riddled with bullet holes that testify to the endemic drug-related violence in that Mexican city, visitors encounter a wide range of works that speak to the social and economic divisions of our time.

Those divisions are also brought to mind in jarring fashion by Shilpa Gupta's automated private security gate, which crashes into the walls of the Central Pavilion every time it swings shut. Portraying the armed gates and monolithic barrier wall that Israel has erected in the West Bank, Rula Hulawani's starkly powerful black-and-white photographs reference an ongoing history in which an entire people have been denied their freedom and homeland. And at a moment when the number of displaced

peoples across the globe has grown to comprise almost one percent of the world's population, Halil Altındere's *Neverland* (2019) presents the Biennale's first pavilion for refugee artists. Its punning title compellingly underscores the refugee's impossible status as a stateless person.

The split format of *May You Live In Interesting Times* is echoed elsewhere by myriad artworks that deal with doubles, alternative identities and mirror worlds. Stan Douglas's video installation *Doppelgänger* (2019), Darren Bader's augmented reality app *Scott Mendes's VENICE!* (2019) and Dominique Gonzalez-Foerster and Joi Bittle's large-scale diorama of a Martian landscape, all evoke the human desire for exploration whilst simultaneously evoking parallel realities.

A conversation with the audience

*If I make a piece, I don't want it to say what I would say, because then it becomes me talking through the piece. I want to see if I can make the object have a conversation with whoever's looking.*¹⁴

JIMMIE DURHAM

Many different thinkers and artists have proposed over the past 150 years that works of art are collaborative transactions.

The artist sets the initial parameters of a potential conversation, but the viewer's own associative responses and interpretations continue its development. All of the artists in this exhibition were selected because in some way their work acknowledges the open-ended character of this exchange. It takes seriously art's role as a catalyst for inviting and inciting dialogue.

These artists recognise that the meanings that arise around their works are not embedded principally in objects but in conversations through which their possible significance and uses are extended and multiplied. Trafficking in ways of looking that lie under the radar, artists discern links between images and ideas that most of us fail to notice. They pay attention to how things connect, in other words, and their works can sensitise us to seeing the connectedness of things. Paying attention in this way can make life much more interesting. The world looks different, more complex, and also more precarious. As Jesse Darling has observed, "the consistent thread is that everything is connected and everything is vulnerable...The interconnectedness of things is full of trouble..."¹⁵

May You Live In Interesting Times has been formulated in the belief that an exhibition, like a work of art, is most deeply engaging when it provokes a vivacious inquisitiveness and encourages us to wonder and to question, and to try to better understand how different pieces of the world fit together.

At the end of the day this exhibition is principally a trigger for the theories that its more curious audience members may develop in response to the artworks they encounter. Ultimately, what is most important about an exhibition is not what happens inside a gallery, but how audiences use their experience afterwards to re-imagine everyday realities from expanded perspectives. In other words, an exhibition should make the most of art's capacity to open people's eyes to previously unconsidered ways of being in the world so that they might change, however briefly, their view of that world and their place in it. This is what it means to live in interesting times.

- ¹ Among the many well-known figures who made reference to this "ancient Chinese curse" in public utterances and publications, we may count literary figures ranging from Albert Camus to Arthur C. Clarke, and politicians such as U.S. Senator Robert F. Kennedy, who cited it in an influential speech during a 1966 visit to Cape Town, South Africa, and U.S. Senator Hillary Rodham Clinton, who referred to it in her 2003 autobiography, Simon & Schuster, New York.
- ² Henri Focillon, *The Life of Forms in Art*, trans. George Kubler, Zone Books, New York 1992, p. 16.
- ³ Emily Steer, "5 Questions with Jean-Luc Moulène", *Elephant*, 12 April 2016.
- ⁴ Andrea K. Scott, "Jan Cheng's Alternate Realities at MoMA PS1", *The New Yorker*, 15 May 2017, accessed online.
- ⁵ Cornelius Castoriadis, *The Imaginary Institution of Society: Creativity and Autonomy in the Social-historical World*, trans. Kathleen Blamney, Polity Press, Cambridge 1987, p. 142.
- ⁶ Umberto Eco, *The Open Work* (1961). This edition: Harvard University Press, Cambridge, MA 1989, p. 82.
- ⁷ "Digital Reflex: Avery Singer and Ed Atkins respond to Texte zur Kunst", *Texte zur Kunst*, 00.05 (2014), p. 68.
- ⁸ Alice Inggs, "Kemang Wa Lehulena, History Will Break Your Heart", *Asymptote*, April 2016, accessed online.
- ⁹ Griseida Marrazz Breven, "Julie Mehretu interview: The Politics of Abstraction", *Financial Times*, 24 January 2019.
- ¹⁰ See Studs Terkel, "An interview with James Baldwin" (1961), published in *Conversations with James Baldwin*, ed. Fred R. Studdley and Louis H. Pratt, University Press of Mississippi, Jackson 1989, p. 21.
- ¹¹ Kellyanne Conway during a *Meet the Press* interview on 22 January 2017, in which she defended White House Press Secretary Sean Spicer's false statement about the attendance numbers of Donald Trump's inauguration as President of the United States.
- ¹² "The Theory and Practice of Oligarchical Collectivism", in George Orwell, *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (1849). This edition: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, Boston, MA 1983, p. 203.
- ¹³ *Kinfolk*, no. 24, June 2017, accessed online.
- ¹⁴ Jimmie Durham, "Covert Operations: Excerpts from a discussion between Jimmie Durham and Michael Tausig with Miwon Kwon and Helen Molesworth, 1997", in Jimmie Durham, eds. Laura Mulvey, Dirk Stauswert and Mark Alice Durant, Phaidon, London 1995, p. 119.
- ¹⁵ "In Conversation with Jesse Darling", Tate, 1 November 2018, accessed online.