

Art

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Kerry James Marshall

Interviewed by Lorne Abse Gogarty

The Collector

Mark Prince

Lucy Beech

Profile by Maria Walsh

Our Little Fascisms

Skye Arundhati Thomas

The Palazzo Forcella De Seta, which overlooks the Mediterranean Sea, offered a pertinent context to reflect on the topic of migration. In Patricia Kaersenhout's *The Soul of Salt*, 2016, the artist transplanted a mountain of salt into one of the palace's stunning rooms, a reference to a Caribbean legend according to which slaves refrained from eating salt to remain light and fly back to Africa. Forensic Oceanography's *Liquid Violence*, 2018, which brings together videos and research projects analysing contemporary Mediterranean migration and the deadly effects of militarised borders, acquired added poignancy in view of Salvini's recent measures and the Italian government's increasing criminalisation of NGO rescue efforts. The palace additionally featured Laura Poitras's immersive video installation *Signal Flow*, 2018. Made in collaboration with Italian filmmakers and journalists, the work investigates the Mobile User Objective System (MUOS), installed in south-eastern Sicily (in the middle of the island's last remaining cork forest) by the US military in 2009, an indispensable communications hub for conducting drone warfare. Tania Bruguera's mixed-media installation *Article 11*, 2018 – on show at the Palazzo Ajutamicristo – also focused on the global communications system, displaying a wall mural by and documentation of the activist group NO MUOS, which has been protesting the occupation of the territory and its satellites' harmful effects on human health.

The mobility of a transnational capitalism has meant the increasing (now planetary) integration of localised social sites into global networks of various sorts. Yet far from enabling an immaterial and frictionless flow of information, resources and people, such networks, as a number of works in the Palazzo Ajutamicristo explore, are enmeshed with often opaque material infrastructures and power dynamics. In *Citizen Ex*, 2015, James Bridle employed an algorithm that reveals that we leave nationally specific data traces when accessing the internet. In Lydia Ourahmane's *The Third Choir*, 2014, the spectator is confronted with 20 empty Naftal oil barrels from Algeria emitting the sound of static, the source of which appears to derive from mobile phones and radios placed inside the barrels. The first artwork to be legally exported from Algeria since the implementation of restrictions on the movement of art in 1962, the installation registers the various legal and political arrangements that determine which objects get to circulate and which do not. Rayyane Tabet's similarly minimalist installation presented a series of 10cm steel rings, replicating the diameter and outline of the Trans-Arabian Pipeline which transported oil from Saudia Arabia to Lebanon from 1950 to 1983, crossing the border of five different political entities and territories. The company was dissolved because of socio-political conflicts in the region; a rise and fall represented by a series of disintegrating letterheads from the company's Beirut headquarters framed on the surrounding walls. The work served as a useful reminder of the finitude not only of human and non-human life, but also of economic and social systems; an ephemerality that was also manifest in the curators' use of grandiose palaces – typically in various states of disrepair or renovation – as exhibition venues. Yet as Walter Benjamin warned, 'capitalism will not die a natural death'. Nor will the intensification of various economic, social and ecological crises necessarily lead to a better future. What is certain, and was admirably thematised by the curatorial ambition of 'The Planetary Garden', is the need to continue cultivating connections between different social and ecological moments and movements. ■

Alex Fletcher is a critic based in London.



Taus Makhacheva
Caspian Sea – industrial pressing mould 2018

Taus Makhacheva: BaidÀ

narrative projects London

19 September to 3 November

Taus Makhacheva has a flair for striking imagery. Her film of a tightrope-walker carrying copies of works from the Dagestan Museum of Fine Art across a deep chasm between two rocky outcrops in the Caucasus was one of the more memorable pieces in last year's Venice Biennale.

The Russian-Dagestani artist's current show at narrative projects in London is more muted in its visual effects, but no less powerful for it. The film *Baida*, 2017, one of two pieces on display, shows water shot from a motorboat and little else. It was part of a richly suggestive wind-up at the Biennale, where a small canal-side notice indicated that a performance would be staged at a remote location in the lagoon. While the performance turned out to be a hoax, visitors could access the film through the Biennale website. They could watch the footage of water streaming by, footage that is blown up to fill a wall at narrative projects, and listen to four invisible protagonists who chatted as they journeyed out across the lagoon towards a performance that never was, even for them.

The film is rooted in research Makhacheva carried out on illegal fishing for sturgeon in the Caspian Sea, a dangerous trade in unpredictable waters. She learnt, for instance, that when a small fishing vessel (or *baida*) capsized, fishermen would lash themselves to it so that their bodies would later be recovered. She also heard the story of a father and son who were stranded for many days in the water after their boat tipped over. As the story is retold in the film, the father had to slap his son periodically to keep him from falling asleep and sinking. This episode is not shown in *Baida*: it is relayed in a conversation, scripted by the British artist Tim Etchells, between the off-screen characters as they speed towards the would-be performance. These characters, an Italian boatman and three art-world insiders, expect to see a re-enactment of the original drama but instead find only an upturned boat. So the film moves towards a Beckettian anti-climax, the art-world professionals wondering idly about the absent performers (is this an intermission?) as they circle around the capsized vessel, before their minds turn back to the *aperitivo* they hope to have on their way to the evening's event at the Yugoslav, no, the Serbian pavilion.

Dagestan and the perilous labour of Caspian Sea fishermen are available in the film only as the sporadic concerns of poorly informed and jaded observers. When the more earnest of the three art professionals wonders at the idea of a fisherman lashing himself

to his boat, one of his companions muses about being tied up in bed; when he speaks of the father slapping his son in the water, she says a slap from her assistant might save her from falling into a stupor at art events. So the artist's Dagestani heritage recedes as the film unfolds, the artist signalling both her profound interest in the Caspian Sea and the world it supports and her reluctance to show that world directly in a context in which it could only come across as quaintly folkloric and distant.

The fishermen motivate her project but remain absent, even their understudies are absent, though in one of several ironies attending the piece, caviar, the product of their labour, may not be – it is served at some of the more lavish opening week parties at the Biennale.

The other work on display similarly takes a quizzical look at the precarious economies of towns bordering the Caspian Sea. On one side of a table modelled on a Soviet shop counter the artist has arranged cake moulds and cakes in the shape of the inland sea while on the other she has put a bowl filled with sturgeon swim bladders, which are sold by fishermen there and used as an adhesive by art conservators around the world (when they can get hold of it). This arrangement spans a huge divide, looking at once at the labour of hard-pressed men and women in the Russian republic and at rarefied art-world rituals, at objects of consumption as ordinary as cake and as rare and expensive as sturgeon bladders and art objects.

In Makhacheva's work the witty dialogue, multiple vanishing acts and unexpected conjunctions together screen off a kind of despair, a feeling that under current circumstances depictions of communities and places that lie beyond metropolitan ken are bound to grind down their specificity. How do you speak about people who risk their lives in their work to people who risk missing their *aperitivo*? In such circumstances, rumours and residues, scraps that trade in absences, may be the best you can do. ■

Marcus Verhagen is an art historian and critic.

Raqs Media Collective: Not Yet At Ease

Firstsite Colchester 28 September to 20 January

The centenary of the First World War has occasioned much reflection on the original conflict and our current historical consciousness of it. Art, too, has played a significant role

in such reflections and the programme of exhibitions and events commissioned by 14-18 NOW has mostly avoided the aggrandising logic of the traditional monument. Commissioned by 14-18 NOW and Firstsite in Colchester, Raqs Media Collective has produced an exhibition that takes as its theme the symptoms of shell shock amongst Indian soldiers fighting for the British Army.

From intensive research, the group discovered evidence attesting to how Indian soldiers, just like their British counterparts from working-class backgrounds, were deliberately not diagnosed with shell shock. While soldiers from higher social classes received the correct diagnosis, those from the 'lower orders' received a fudged status of 'Not Yet Diagnosed – Nervous' instead. This act of discrimination is replicated by one element of the exhibition: on Firstsite's huge curved wall, Raqs has presented common phrases with the word 'nerves' removed from each. The reference to 'nerves' has not entirely vanished, however, but has been replaced by medical diagrams of the nervous system.

The installation, comprising the second element of the exhibition, wears its research lightly. While many research-led art projects opt for strongly discursive presentations, 'Not Yet At Ease' communicates its findings largely through bodily sensation. This is done in part by Raqs' intelligent use of space. Padded partition walls have been arranged so that the galleries have become defamiliarising corridors. On some of the walls there are rectangular openings that permit limited visual access into small, enclosed areas and other parts of the gallery. Through some of these openings, films intermixing archival footage and performance can be seen, but only really in a broken, fragmented fashion; in looking through the opening we often see just part of the video image, thereby necessitating looking through another opening to view the remainder. The walls intentionally resemble both a hospital and the labyrinthine network of trenches. Also present are audio elements in which we hear snippets of letters from soldiers, medical reports and abstract sounds that resonate down the corridors. Finally, the ceiling has been lowered, thereby intensifying the sense of claustrophobia.

Despite the intended hospital/trench resonances of the installation, it is fruitful to perceive the disorienting corridors, overlapping voices and semi-hidden videos as a topography of the traumatised psyche or even as the over-stimulated nervous system. Certainly, the walled-off videos, glimpsed through rectangular apertures, suggest mind's-eye images that are incompletely repressed. And, in a similar fashion, the way that the audio has been staggered so that the same words and sounds are echoed in different locations is redolent of inner voices, seemingly not our own, that return only to haunt and torment. To that degree, Raqs has produced a space that conjoins the physical and the psychological, thus corresponding to how early 20th-century understandings of shell shock coalesced those very qualities.

By comprehending the installation as simultaneously hospital/trenches and mind, it becomes clearer that it not only examines shell shock but also induces psychological discomfort in the viewer. In critical theory and art, Walter Benjamin's brilliant account of the fragmentation of experience and our increased resilience against 'shock effects' resulting from our exposure to modernity, technology and urbanism has long been a source of inspiration. But it is one of the exhibition's virtues that it sidesteps this source, which weaves Sigmund Freud's psychoanalysis with Georg Simmel's sociology, and

Raqs Media Collective
Not Yet At Ease
installation view

