

# The 10 Best Things We Saw at the Venice Biennale

Text by **KAT HERRIMAN**

Photographs and Video by **JASON SCHMIDT** MAY 16, 2017



Mark Bradford at the U.S. pavilion. Jason Schmidt

**Mark Bradford's** installation at the United States pavilion begins with "Hephaestus," a heroic poem written by the artist and drawn from Greek mythology as well as from his own biography. It is installed outside of the Jeffersonian-style building on cement-board slabs. Bradford then forces visitors to enter the building from the left rather than through the imposing front door marked with columns. "I don't think progressive ideas ever come through the front door," Bradford says. "We always come through the side door, through the window, through the tunnel we bore, we struggle for our identities."

Inside the belly of the beast, Bradford's sculptures and paintings disturb the coldness of the architecture with bright colors and imperfect textures. The central rotunda is obscured by tendrils of dark painted masses that seem to reveal the shadowy powers at work beneath the pristine surface. The climax in Bradford's mind is the final room, where his 2005 video, "Niagara," plays on a loop. It depicts a man walking away from the lens. The work, Bradford says, "is a cliffhanger. It is about having a hope in something that you can't see, which is the future, and acknowledging where I've been."



Rachel Rose, photographed with her work in Venice. Jason Schmidt

**Rachel Rose's** "Lake Valley" installation, which features an animated video about a pet left home alone, is like stumbling into someone else's dream. "I created the main character from looking at all these different narratives of children's stories alongside the emergence of the idea of the child in relationship to the adult," Rose says. "One through line I noticed was abandonment. I wanted to focus on this sense of loneliness as I've seen it in different narratives but also as I've felt it." Rose's animation is layered with thousands of 19th-century illustrations which she lifted from children's books; these patterns bleed into one another to form the landscape of the garden where the creature escapes to as well as its home. Almost psychedelic in its movements, "Lake Valley" leaves the audience with a sense of unease that feels at once fresh and familiar.

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Venice Biennale | Anne Imhof

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Anne Imhof's work at the German pavilion won a Golden Lion award, the Biennale's top prize. Jason Schmidt

"In English, *faust* means fist," **Anne Imhof** says. "Of course in Germany, it has a different connotation. It is something you have to deal with sooner or later." Drawing upon the legend in which a scholar bargains

with the devil for unlimited knowledge, Imhof's German pavilion might best be described as an immersive painting composed of actors, Doberman pinschers and sculptures. The living installation is set into motion by a troupe of sharp-eyed artists, musicians and dancers who Imhof has continually collaborated with. You can feel their chemistry. It's contagious.

As you circulate through the space, so do the performers: They hang from the ceiling, they slide beneath the glass floor, they scale the roof, they crawl on top of each other. The power dynamics are constantly shifting as different individuals, both performers and visitors, collide. The actors communicate to each other and to Imhof via WhatsApp — giving each other instructions and cues. The choreography is reactive rather than strictly rehearsed. "I would resist the idea that something needs to be acquired by experiencing the work or that some understanding needs to be arrived at," says Mickey Mahar, one of the dancers Imhof works with regularly. "It's about having an experience and then processing how it affects you."



Senga Nengudi with her work. Jason Schmidt

**Senga Nengudi** debuted her "R.S.V.P." sculptures in the '70s, and since then the artist has continually returned to nylon pantyhose as a material that walks the fine line between fragility and strength. In the early days, Nengudi would activate the work with performances, but these days, she uses the help of dancers. And for "A.C.Q.," her new work for the biennale, she enlisted the help of a fan, which makes the pantyhose tremble. "At first I was going to blast everyone out with a turbo fan," Nengudi laughs. "But I really wanted this general nervousness that's going on. We all are feeling this kind of anxiety and I wanted to capture that energy"



Phyllida Barlow with her sculptures in the British pavilion. Jason Schmidt

When you approach the **Phyllida Barlow** installation at the British pavilion, the first thing you see is a series of bulbous sculptures staring back. "I don't know what those blobs, plumes, lollipops, bubbles, heads are," Barlow says. "But I do think they have to do with the action of wanting to throw something out and holding it there. It's like shaking all the things out of the cupboard and seeing how they land. I'm curious about the macabre and the fantastic, the joy and the despair."

Barlow's works press the viewer to look up and consider their own size. "I have a desire to reach beyond the standard eye-level experience," she says of her pieces' scale. "I make the sections my size so I can have contact with them continuously, but once they start to assemble they become grand. It's like the studio is a rehearsal, but we have no idea what we are rehearsing. We don't even know what the play is, let alone the script."



**Erwin Wurm's** work at the Austrian pavilion conflates two waves: the moment when Homo sapiens first arrived in Europe via the Mediterranean and the rise of Italian tourism in the 1970s. A camper with holes cut into its exterior sits in a white room with its parts and furniture scattered across the floor; each presents a perch for meditation. "When tourists flocked to Italy in the '70s, their caravans were not only their living rooms, but their bedrooms, their toilets and their kitchens," Wurm says. "They didn't even need to have contact with the people living there — they brought it all themselves. I wanted to give people the chance to escape, levitate and in a way infiltrate the life of this camper. In a way, the whole art world is a caravan."

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An installation and performance by Mariechen Danz. Jason Schmidt

**Mariechen Danz** treated her installation at the Arsenale like a primordial theater that the audience is invited to inhabit. The floor is made of a local mud, which rises to form a pedestal for her thermoactive sculpture, "Womb Tomb," as well as a stage. A set of feet cast in different materials, like coal and agate, walk along the wall. "The idea is that the whole room offers a change of perspective," Danz says. "There is no clarity between north, south, east, west. The piece is a map of itself."

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Alicja Kwade inside her installation. Jason Schmidt

**Alicja Kwade's** sculpture, “WeltenLinie (One in a Time),” has a cinematic quality. As you pass it, each of its parts appears slightly different. The static objects on the floor — rocks, a tree trunk, a duo of chairs — are set into motion by mirrors. Reality seems to shift as viewers walk through the piece. “I always try to give sculpture a time sequence,” Kwade explains of the mesmerizing doubling and tripling. “I hope that it is more like a feeling or experience than a solid sculpture; that is why I included the space so much — it’s like a phantasm rather than an object.”

In addition to her indoor installation, Kwade created an outdoor sculpture that she describes as a “goddess playing with planets like marbles.” “We are living on one blue ball, but there are so many options about how this could have developed,” Kwade says. “It’s only by chance we are here in this moment. In this way, all the problems of this world become almost ironic. Why are we fighting wars when we are all just products of the same luck?”



Tehching Hsieh with his work in the Taiwanese pavilion. Jason Schmidt

The biennale's two-year cycle takes on new weight in the Taiwanese pavilion through "Doing Time," a short survey of the artist **Tehching Hsieh**'s long history. The show highlights two of Hsieh's "One Year Performances." The first, "One Year Performance 1980-1981 (Time Clock Piece)," shows the year the artist spent recording every hour with a worker's punch clock and camera. The second, "One Year Performance 1981-1982 (Outdoor Piece)," follows Hsieh on his harrowing adventures living on the streets of New York without shelter. Hsieh's focus is not the endurance or the deprivation that is so evident in his images but instead the use of time as a medium. "I am not interested in pain," Hsieh says. "I cannot say I don't have pain, but it's not my concept. To me, the concept is wasting time. It's my way to live. I create that way. I don't say how to pass time because to me it doesn't matter if you are working hard or do nothing. It's the same."



Brazilian artist Cinthia Marcelle. Jason Schmidt

You cannot enter **Cinthia Marcelle**'s "Hunting Ground" without looking at your feet. The artist subverted the symmetry of the Brazilian pavilion by installing a slanted grate that stretches from the entrance to the building's back wall. "I wanted to create instability," Marcelle says. "If you think of the context of Brazil, we don't accept what is happening now. I am representing Brazil so I felt I needed to address the instability and propose a new way to circulate around this building."

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Photograph by Brooke Holm. Styled by Victoria Petro Conroy



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