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#51 'MATTER AS A HOPE OF FINDING SOME ANSWERS' - INTERVIEW SERIES - JULY 2019

PART 1: 'MATTER AS A HOPE OF FINDING SOME ANSWERS.'

A short MAP season dedicated to a series of interviews between Eastern European national participants at the 58th Biennale di Venezia and artist writers Manca Bajec and Isobel Wohl. Introducing the project, Bajec and Wohl are in conversation with writer/filmmaker Juliet Jacques.



Nada Prlja Red-iness II, 2013, video, single screen, 5 minute loop. Courtesy Calvert 22 Foundation and Nada Prlja

Manca Bajec and Isobel Wohl: Ralph Rugoff, curator of the 58th International Art Exhibition of the Biennale di Venezia, has chosen the title *May You Live in Interesting Times*. The title uses the language of a supposed ancient Chinese curse, repeatedly invoked by Western politicians despite the fact that no such saying exists in China, nor is there any evidence that such a saying existed in the past. Rugoff asserts that ‘art can be a kind of guide for how to live and think in “interesting times”’, noting that ‘[i]ntelligent artistic activity involves creating forms that call attention to what forms conceal, and the functions that they fulfil.’ How do you feel that this title and its history make it possible to develop new and useful modes of thought for our current global predicament, including (though by no means limited to) the rise of authoritarianism and other forms of damage to political stability in Eastern Europe and elsewhere? Does the title help make aspects of that predicament visible? What, if anything, does it conceal?

Juliet Jacques: It’s interesting that the title is actually Western, as these ‘interesting times’ have, in Western Europe and North America, signified the end of the ‘end of history’, proclaimed after the fall of Soviet

communism in 1989-1991, and the rise of popular left-wing movements and right-wing demagogues. This apparent 'consensus' only ever had minimal passive consent (as Jeremy Gilbert put it) after trade unions and other socialist power bases were destroyed and did not just erase class differences; Chantal Mouffe warned in the early 2000s that antagonisms would inevitably re-emerge and be expressed extremely harshly because people had forgotten that politics, fundamentally, was about contesting mutually opposed ideas.

This also conceals the fact that in Eastern Europe, these 'interesting times' are not new, especially in the former Yugoslavia with its 20th century shifts between empire and monarchy, Nazi occupation and socialism, and catastrophic war during the 1990s. It does, however, provide a useful shorthand for the entrenchment of far-right governments in Poland and Hungary or the rise of violent nationalist street movements in Ukraine. The responsibility of the artists and curators reacting to this title should be to create/choose forms that are capable of exploring the long-term historical reasons for these developments, ideally underpinned by class analysis even if that analysis is not foregrounded. Artists from countries with strong Marxist traditions are perhaps better placed to make such work: I have found video and performance artists in post-Soviet or Yugoslav nations impressively nuanced in their investigations of how the legacies of state socialism have come up against the destructive forces of international neoliberalism. The works of, say, Nada Prlja (North Macedonia) about migration, or Mykola Ridnyi about the eradication of Ukraine's radical anarchist histories and the post-Maidan war with Russia, show far more insight into what lies behind these 'interesting times' than (say) the bewildered British liberal artists who cannot understand why anyone might not unconditionally love the European Union.

Bajec and Wohl: Outside of the Exhibition itself, the Biennale di Venezia follows a format of national representation. How can we understand the function of the Biennale's individual national pavilions—and the competition between them—in our current political climate? Although the pavilions are not formally part of Rugoff's curated exhibition, what does the persistence of this structure suggest about our 'interesting times'? How, in 2019, should we think about the broad discrepancies in finances and soft

power that are themselves on view in the exhibition, in particular with reference to Eastern European pavilions?

Jacques: Alban Muja, representing Kosovo, raised some interesting points about this in your interview—the pavilion is a way to raise questions about how a state constitutes itself, questions which always change over time but are particularly loaded in the case of a nation only recently independent after a traumatic war. It is also a way to subtly demand more (and better) international recognition—which would, of course, have been magnified if that pavilion had won.

As far as international competition goes, it's perhaps less loaded than the Olympic Games, the FIFA World Cup or Eurovision because there are no questions about who gets to host the Biennale. Having individual artists representing countries, means that a national victory does not necessarily mean that country's art is 'better' than anyone else's—perhaps it has just produced one particular talent. It's also worth noting the level of cross-border collaboration: for example, Katerina Gregos, a Greek curator living in Brussels, worked on Igor Grubić's exhibition for the Croatian pavilion, whilst Lucia Pietroiusti, based at the Serpentine Gallery in London, curated the Lithuanian pavilion that won the Golden Lion. The 'interesting times' of Rugoff's title spring partly from widespread anxieties about the movement of people, how that changes ideas of national identity, and how apparently popular concerns about immigration are given legitimacy by liberal-left or centrist politicians who don't know how to counter them, cynical media outlets for whom it sells papers, and far-right authoritarians who leverage them for support. So, the changing nature of the 'national' pavilion reflects the wider reality, and can implicitly make a positive case for it, although one that may not influence the people it needs to.

Bajec and Wohl: How do you perceive the interaction between this Biennale's title, the social aspirations of contemporary art, and the operation of the Biennale itself as an institution? How do the Biennale's audience and the audiences of other similar international art events participate in our 'interesting times' and their various conflicts and fictions? Is it possible for such events to function as nexus for forward-looking forms of creative engagement? How?

Jacques: The international scope of the Biennale can be useful for bringing different modes of artistic engagement into dialogue with each other after they have incubated in specific local contexts, although its status as a pinnacle of the art world means that works are exhibited with the top end of the market in mind. The best political art is not aimed at 'the market', so that's a contradiction, but despite the competitive aspect, the Biennale can function as a place for engaged artists to communicate with each other, as well as curators, the press and the public.

It's hard for an event as big as the Biennale to avoid issues of appropriation, or of institutionalising and thus neutralising radical forms of political art. Christoph Büchel's decision to bring the ship on which a thousand migrants died in 2015 to the Arsenale this year, with the intention of confronting the Italian government over its border policies, resulted in numerous visitors (including the artists Eva & Adele) posing for selfies in front of it or putting it on Instagram. Perhaps those visitors did take some time to think about the ongoing disaster, but as a gesture, it was not as well conceived or targeted as Banu Cennetoğlu's 'The List' [a list of the 34,361 (and ongoing) documented deaths of asylum seekers, refugees and migrants who have lost their lives within or on the borders of Europe since 1993]. Büchel's was the most headline-grabbing contribution: I think it's possible for more thoughtful political work to feature in such an institution and provoke meaningful audience consideration, but contemplation from artists of how social media and meme culture might affect its reception is necessary at this point.

Juliet Jacques is a writer and filmmaker based in London. She has published two books, mostly recently *Trans: A Memoir* (Verso, 2015). Her short fiction, essays and journalism have appeared in *The Guardian*, *Frieze*, *Granta*, *The London Review of Books*, *New York Times* and many other publications. Her short films have screened in galleries and festivals worldwide.

Manca Bajec is an artist and researcher. She lives and works in London, UK and Ljubljana, Slovenia.