

Metaphoric Sites

In the midst of the general lack of commitment of the central exhibition of the Venice Biennale this year, Avi Lubin visits three significant and interesting projects that offer metaphoric sites and spaces for experimentation and cooperation.

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Critique / Avi Lubin November 22, 2017
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1. Much has been written about "Faust," Anne Imhof's work at the German Pavilion in the Giardini, curated by Susanna Pfepper. Imhof, the winner of the Golden Lion award for best national pavilion, created a four-hour-long performance. The work developed and crystallized over the course of seven months as a multi-participant conversation among performers from different fields – music, visual art, dance, philosophy, law. It demands perseverance and stamina of the viewers, taking care to avoid a clear structure of development or spectacular climaxes, and seeking to keep the viewers in a state of alert anticipation. And yet, the work has a beginning and an end, duration and organization, even if Imhof prefers to think of it as a picture rather than a theater.

IMG_1246.JPG





[1]Eliza Douglas and Henry Douglas From: Anne Imhof, Faust, 2017. German Pavilion, 57th Venice Biennale

Photography: Tomer Sapir

<u>IMG_1257.JPG</u> [2]





[3]Billy Bultheel From: Anne Imhof, Faust, 2017. German Pavilion, 57th Venice Biennale

Photography: Tomer Sapir

Because of the long lines, when most viewers enter the space the performance is already at an advanced stage (and most of them do not stay through the end, but hang out for a while and continue on their way). Those who enter before the performance starts find the performers arranged throughout the space in static poses. Some stand on glass shelves affixed to the wall, and all have a glazed look in their eyes. At one end of the space, on a very high ledge, stands Billy Bultheel, a musician and performance artist. Facing him, on the other side of the room, positioned very high as well, is Emma Daniel, a dancer and a choreographer. They both watch from high above, as if on guard, lurking, their presence powerful and menacing.



<u>IMG_1296.JPG</u> [4]



[5]Anne Imhof, Faust, 2017 (installation view) German Pavilion, 57th Venice Biennale

Photography: Tomer Sapir



<u>IMG_1294.JPG</u> [6]



[7]Billy Bultheel and John Johnson From: Anne Imhof, Faust, 2017. German Pavilion, 57th Venice Biennale

Photography: Tomer Sapir

The space ranges from sculpture to architecture to a stage set. Imhof disrupts its spatial proportions. She has built a glass floor, about a meter above the building's original one, which changed the relationship of the space to the human presence it contains. Improvised beds, cell phones, bandages, boxing gloves, slingshots, an electric guitar, and water bottles are discernable under the glass. A significant part of the performers' actions takes place there, under the glass floor and the viewers' feet. Several of the walls display inscriptions and paintings, traces of what has occurred in previous days and indications of what is to come in the next few hours. There is a hose in one of the



side rooms, an amplifier in another. Glass walls separate the rooms.

<u>IMG_1403.JPG</u> [8]



[9]Emma Daniel and Billy Bultheel From: Anne Imhof, Faust, 2017. German Pavilion, 57th Venice Biennale

Photography: Tomer Sapir



IMG_1335.JPG **[10]**



[11]Billy Bultheel, John Johnson, Frances Chiaverini, Enad Marouf From: Anne Imhof, Faust, 2017, German Pavilion, 57th Venice Biennale

Photography: Tomer Sapir

<u>IMG_1267.JPG</u> [12]





[13]Henry Douglas From: Anne Imhof, Faust, 2017, German Pavilion, 57th Venice Biennale

Photography: Tomer Sapir

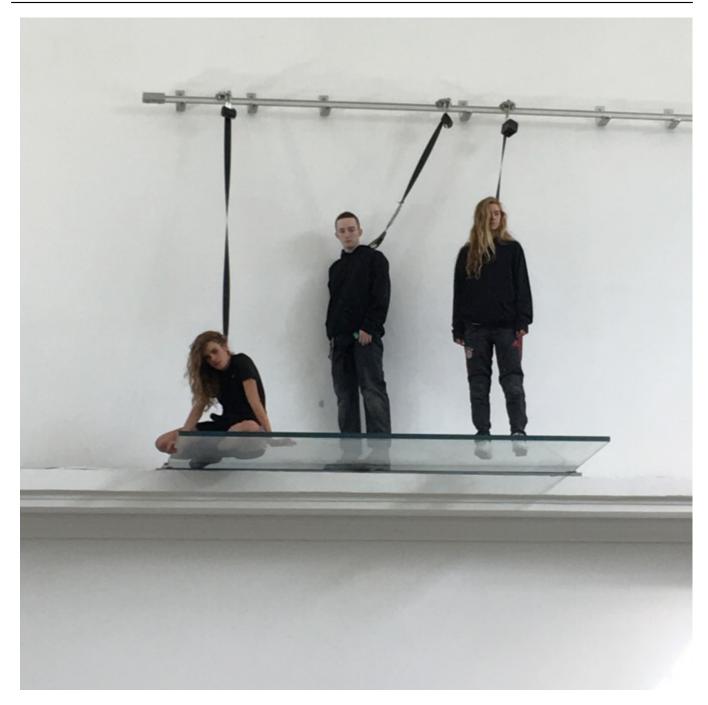
Like others before her, Imhof was attempting to respond to the troubled history of the pavilion (and of Germany) by focusing on its architecture. In addition to raising the floor, she blocked the original entrance to the pavilion with a glass wall, a sort of territorial barrier that fences the structure in and allows her to create a separation between those inside and those outside while maintaining visibility. The history of the pavilion is notorious, having inspired works by quite a number artists who have had shows there. In 1909, the Bavarian Pavilion was built in a symmetrical neo-Renaissance style. The façade had lonic columns and a central pediment leading to a high-ceilinged exhibition space, with exits to three side rooms. It quickly became the pavilion of the German Empire. Following the visit by Hitler and Goebbels to the 1938 Biennale, the building underwent substantial alterations. It was enlarged, an apsis was added, which increased the central space, and marble replaced the wood



floor. The most significant change was to the façade: instead of the historical colonnade, huge pillars were built at the front, with the inscription "Germania" over them – the name Hitler gave Nazi Berlin. The monumental, symmetrical building, with its neo-classical lines, acquired a much stronger presence in the Giardini after the refurbishing. In the 1993 Biennale, Hans Haacke addressed this problematic history: he exposed the foundations of the pavilion and their ties to Nazi Germany, smashed the marble floor and inscribed the word GERMANIA on the wall. He also hung a photograph of Hitler's visit to the pavilion at the entrance.

IMG_1383.JPG [14]





[15]Emma Daniel, Mickey Mahar, and Lea Welsch From: Anne Imhof, Faust, 2017, German Pavilion, 57th Venice Biennale

Photography: Tomer Sapir

<u>IMG_1356.JPG</u> [16]





[17]Anne Imhof, Faust, 2017 (installation view) German Pavilion, 57th Venice Biennale

Photography: Tomer Sapir

<u>IMG_1285.JPG</u> [18]





[19]Emma Daniel From: Anne Imhof, Faust, 2017, German Pavilion, 57th Venice Biennale

Photography: Tomer Sapir

Imhof treats this history more subtly. Her decision, to block the façade and to use materials such as glass and steel, which are identified with Modernism and the International Style, echoes the suggestion made in 1957 by Arnold Bode, the founder of Documenta in Kassel, to tear the pavilion down and built a modernist building that would eliminate the Fascist presence, as well as the installation by the British artist Liam Gillick, in 2009. Gillick created a piece of furniture, with storage compartments, shelves, and drawers, extending the whole length of the pavilion and re-dividing it. The piece he made was based on the Frankfurt Kitchen – a Modernist model for a kitchen designed by the Austrian designer Margaret Schütte-Lihotzky in 1926, which had become the first archetype of



modern kitchen design and had a major effect on the functioning of working women in the 20th century.

Imhof employs other symbols and references: for instance, the title of the work Faust refers to Goethe's famous play about Faust, who has sold his soul to the devil to gain everlasting youth. In German, the title means a clenched fist – a symbol of resistance and revolution but also of aggression and Fascism. Another example would be the outfits. Although most of them are plain and represent the taste of the performers, there is conspicuous use of the uniform of Bayern Munich, a German sports club known for its resistance to Nazi Germany, its merchandise signaling anti-Fascism.

<u>IMG_1347.JPG</u> [20]



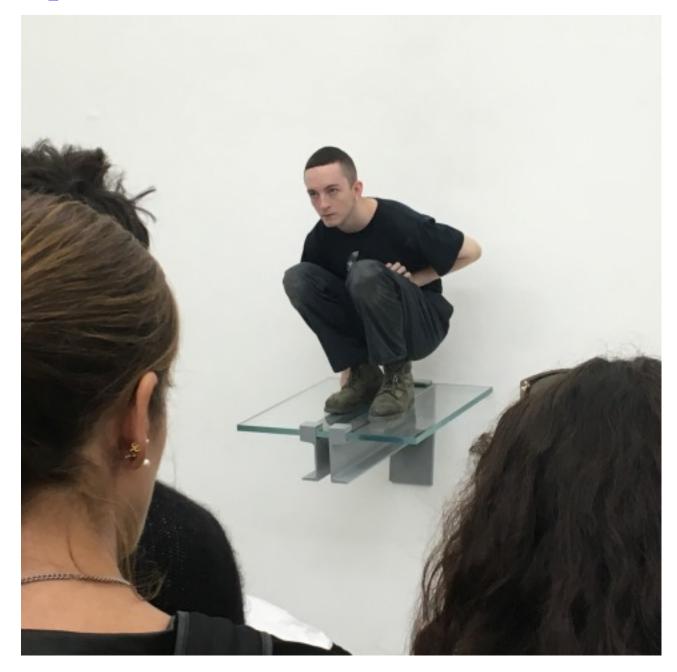
[21]Enad Marouf and Katja Cheraneva



From: Anne Imhof, Faust, 2017, German Pavilion, 57th Venice Biennale

Photography: Tomer Sapir

<u>IMG_1341.JPG</u> [22]



[23]Mickey Mahar From: Anne Imhof, Faust, 2017, German Pavilion, 57th Venice Biennale

Photography: Tomer Sapir



Anne Imhof, Faust, 2017 (general view)

German Pavilion, 57th Venice Biennale Photography: Tomer Sapir

<u>IMG_1363.JPG</u> [24]



[25]Mickey Mahar From: Anne Imhof, Faust, 2017, German Pavilion, 57th Venice Biennale

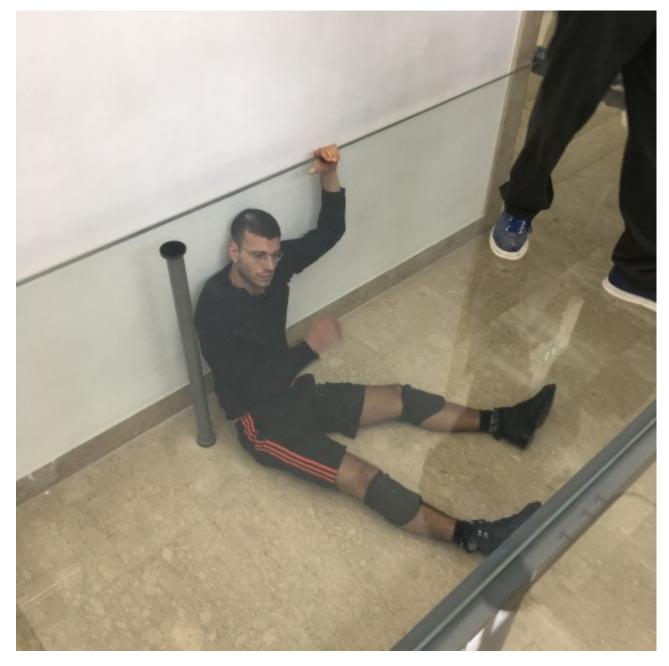
Photography: Tomer Sapir



However, Imhof's work reaches far beyond the use of symbols and signs. For four hours, the work continually seeps in, penetrating through a narrow gap that keeps expanding and deepening. The performers move through the space like junkies, surly teenagers, refugees sleeping on improvised mattresses, runway models, an army of zombies. They crawl, climb, stand idly, glance at their cell phones, light fires under the glass floor, wrestle, stroll, spray water, sing, dance, draw on the wall, pace, lie down. Every once in a while they travel in a course that divides the space and marks the boundaries between the viewers and the event. They march with their arms extended sideways, cross-like, breaking up the space and creating a footpath. At a certain moment, Mickey Mahar, a dancer and a performer, puts his face to the glass from below, licking it listlessly, causing discomfort in a group of women sitting on the floor. At other moments, the voice of Eliza Douglas, an artist, musician, model, and Imhof's partner cuts through the room. Her singing is soft but metallic, penetrating but alienated, imbuing the space. Once in a while gestures of compassion emerge: the performers cling to one another, nestle in each other's bodies. At another instance, the fingers of the artist Enad Marouf, as well as others', peek through gaps in the glass floor. The performance builds up in layers. It forces us to succumb, to "suspend our disbelief" in the words of the English poet and philosopher, Samuel Taylor Coleridge. The boundaries and the relationships between performers and viewers evolve. Tension accumulates during the four hours. The viewers waiting outside to get in peek through the glass wall blocking the entrance, adding to the strain.

<u>IMG_1309.JPG</u> [26]



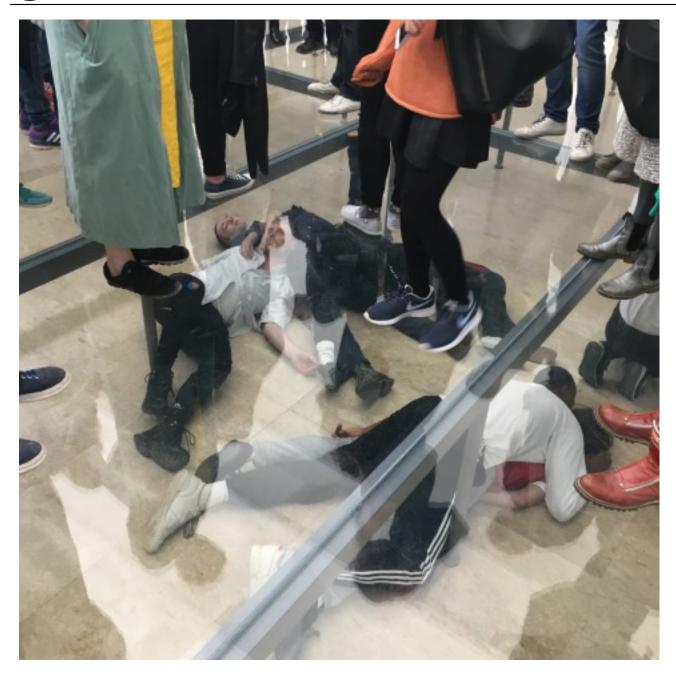


[27]Enad Marouf From: Anne Imhof, Faust, 2017, German Pavilion, 57th Venice Biennale

Photography: Tomer Sapir

<u>IMG_1295.JPG</u> [28]





[29]Billy Bultheel, Mickey Mahar, John Johnson, Frances Chiaverini From: Anne Imhof, Faust, 2017, German Pavilion, 57th Venice Biennale

Photography: Tomer Sapir

2. Beyond the roster of official Biennale events, the show "The Boat is Leaking. The Captain Lied" is on display at the Prada Foundation (Fondazione Prada) – a joint project of the curator Udo Kittelmann and three German artists of different generations and fields: the writer and film director Alexander Kluge, the artist Thomas Demand, and the set and costume designer Anna Viebrock.



Fondazione Prada_The Boat is Leaking_5.jpg [30]

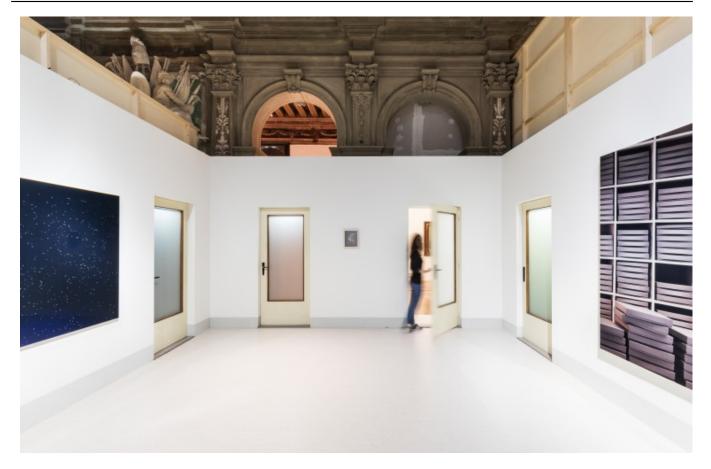


[31]Installation view, "The Boat is Leaking. The Captain Lied" (Curator: Udo Kittelmann). Fondazione Prada, Venice

Anna Viebrock, Stage, 2017. On the TV screen: Alexander Kluge, Terror = Furcht und Schrecken (Terror = Fear and Horror), 2017

Photography: Delfino Sisto Legnani and Marco Cappelletti. Courtesy Fondazione Prada

Fondazione Prada_The Boat is Leaking_8.jpg [32]



[33]Installation view, "The Boat is Leaking. The Captain Lied" (Curator: Udo Kittelmann). Fondazione Prada, Venice

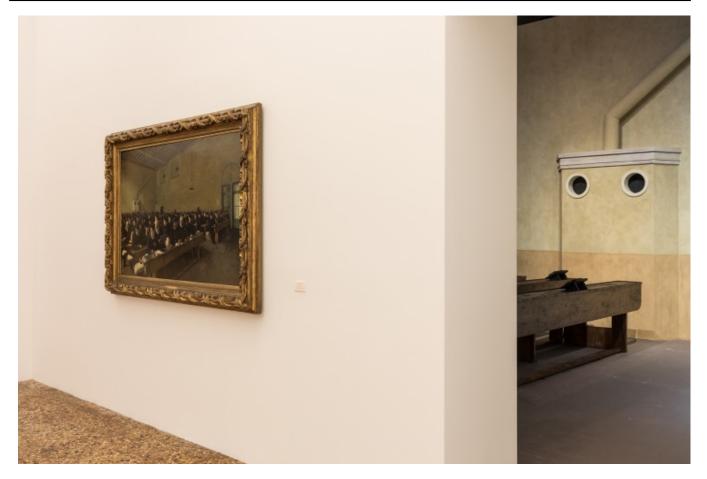
From left to right: Thomas Demand, Konstellation (Constellation), 2000; Anna Viebrock, Doors, 2017. Thomas Demand, Archive, 1995

Photography: Delfino Sisto Legnani and Marco Cappelletti. Courtesy Fondazione Prada

Kittelmann has sought to create an open system, a kind of framework for a symbolic cooperation between the three artists and the curator, a metaphoric site and a sphere of experience, constructed through encounters and conversations among the participants. An array of quotes and internal references between paintings, films, photographs, objects, and architectural elements create a joint project, an immersive space. Nevertheless, the show succeeds in preserving the unique language and the significant apartness of the artists, so that the works are not lost in the overall installation.

Fondazione Prada_The Boat is Leaking_3.jpg [34]

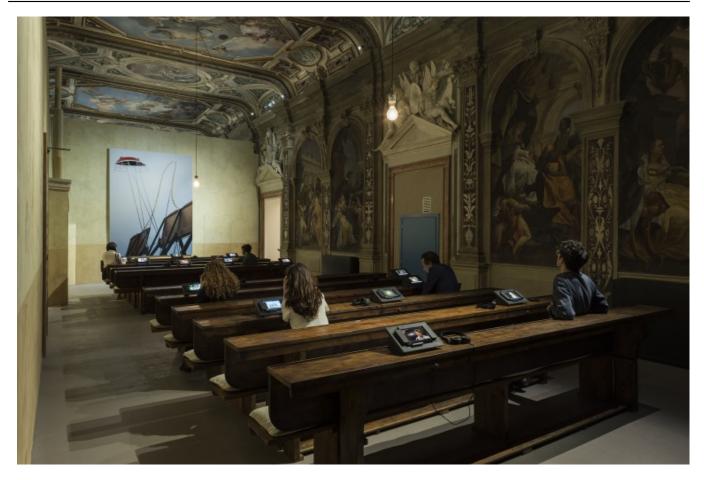




[35]Installation view, "The Boat is Leaking. The Captain Lied" (Curator: Udo Kittelmann). Fondazione Prada, Venice On the left: Angelo Morbelli, Giorni...ultimi! (Last...Days!), 1882-83

Photography: Delfino Sisto Legnani and Marco Cappelletti. Courtesy Fondazione Prada

Fondazione Prada_The Boat is Leaking_29.jpg [36]



[37]Installation view, "The Boat is Leaking. The Captain Lied" (Curator: Udo Kittelmann). Fondazione Prada, Venice

Anna Viebrock, Pio Albergo Trivulzio, 2017. On the screens: Alexander Kluge, a film program on 16 tablets; on the wall, Thomas Demand, Attraktion, 2013

Photography: Delfino Sisto Legnani and Marco Cappelletti. Courtesy Fondazione Prada

Giorni ultimi, a painting by the 19th-century painter Angelo Morbelli, was, to a great extent, the point of departure for the exhibition, albeit due to a mistaken interpretation. In the painting, indigent elderly persons sit on benches beside rows of long, narrow tables in a home for the aged in Milan. The participants in the show mistakenly saw them as old seamen, spending their retirement days in a hostel. That mistake gave birth to the maritime metaphor of the exhibition. The title was added later, taken from Leonard Cohen's song *Everybody Knows*, as was Demand's famous work *Pacific Sun*, from 2012, which reconstructs (by building a paper model and re-photographing it) a scene originally recorded by a security camera onboard a pleasure boat during a severe storm in the Pacific ocean.

This exhibition is spread over three floors of the Palazzo Ca' Corner della Regina. The ground floor features Alexander Kluge's 2007 film *Die sanfte Schminke des Lichts (The gentle makeup of light)*. Kluge, a groundbreaking film-maker and author, born in 1932, plays with lighting to expose the manipulation and deceit that lie at the base of HD cinema.

On both sides of the projection are two doors - locked entrances – one leading to a hotel lobby (the word HOTEL appears in neon lights over the door), and the other to a bar (the neon sign over the door says SAFARI). This is Viebrock's work, *Four Doors*. Photographs by Demand hang in the inaccessible spaces.

Fondazione Prada_The Boat is Leaking_20.jpg [38]



[39]Installation View, The Boat is Leaking. The Captain Lied" (Curator: Udo Kittelmann). Fondazione Prada, Venice

Anna Viebrock, Four Doors, 2017. On the wall: Thomas Demand, Daily #29, 2016

Photography: Delfino Sisto Legnani and Marco Cappelletti. Courtesy Fondazione Prada

Fondazione Prada_The Boat is Leaking_30.jpg [40]





[41]Installation View, The Boat is Leaking. The Captain Lied" (Curator: Udo Kittelmann). Fondazione Prada, Venice

Anna Viebrock, Media system shelf, 2017. Alexander Kluge, Stummfilm mit zwei O-Tonteilen (Silent film with Two Voice-over Sections), 2017; on the wall: Thomas Demand, Kontrollraum (Control Room), 2011

Photography: Delfino Sisto Legnani and Marco Cappelletti. Courtesy Fondazione Prada

The Baroque architecture of the Venetian palace is very much present in the show (the columns, the moldings, the staircase). The show challenges the usual division of labor between curator and artists, blurring the boundaries of each artist, but at the same time creating a sphere that seeks to ignore the separation between reality and fiction and necessitates the suspension of disbelief.

The second floor begins with a passage, a lobby with many doors. The multiplicity of door and passages is a central motif in the two upper floors, giving individual viewers the freedom to create their path themselves, to experience the show and tell a different story about it. These floors are set up as an array of metaphoric places, multilayered pictorial spaces such as a cinema, a gallery, a courtroom, or a theater. This is, in fact, a series of meticulous, theatrical installations by Anna Viebrock, which also serves as a platform for presenting the work of Demand and Kluge. These echo the environments in which they are installed, reacting and challenging them. Thus, sites that appear in a film, a photograph, or a painting reappear in Viebrock's installations, and vice versa. For instance, inside *Exhibition Room*, Viebrock's work from 2017, there is an exhibition of paintings by Morbelli, including the one that had instigated the entire process. In the adjacent room, there is another installation by Viebrock, *Pio Albergo Trivulzio*, with long benches and tables, like those in the painting. Sixteen tablets sit on the tables, running a program of Kluge's films. On the opposite wall hangs a large photograph by Demand, *Attractions (Attraktion)* from 2013.

Fondazione Prada_The Boat is Leaking_4.jpg [42]



[43]Installation View, The Boat is Leaking. The Captain Lied" (Curator: Udo Kittelmann). Fondazione Prada, Venice

Anna Viebrock, Courtroom, 2017; on the screen, Alexander Kluge, Audiopassages, 2017; on the wall, Thomas Demand, Klause IV (Tavern IV), 2006.

Photography: Delfino Sisto Legnani and Marco Cappelletti. Courtesy Fondazione Prada

Fondazione Prada_The Boat is Leaking_7.jpg [44]





[45]Installation View, The Boat is Leaking. The Captain Lied" (Curator: Udo Kittelmann). Fondazione Prada, Venice Anna Viebrock, Untitled, 2017; on the wall, Thomas Demand, Folders, 2017

Photography: Delfino Sisto Legnani and Marco Cappelletti. Courtesy Fondazione Prada

Fondazione Prada_The Boat is Leaking_13.jpg [46]





[47]Installation View, The Boat is Leaking. The Captain Lied" (Curator: Udo Kittelmann). Fondazione Prada, Venice

On the right, Thomas Demand, Patio, 2014

Photography: Delfino Sisto Legnani and Marco Cappelletti. Courtesy Fondazione Prada

In another work, Viebrock has built a courtroom, which is a re-creation of the one from Kluge's film *Yesterday's Girl (Abschied von gestern)* from 1965. This film, screened in the next room (the "Cinema"), tells the story of a young woman who has escaped from East Germany to the West, stolen a sweater, and prosecuted for it. In Viebrock's *Courtroom*, the viewers can sit in the judge's seat, or the accused's, and experience both perspectives. Two Demand photographs also hang in the space – *Tavern II* and *Tavern IV*: works from a series made in 2001 that describe (in the same technique of modeling and re-photographing) a tavern in the German village of Burbuch. A child was kidnapped in that tavern, held as hostage, and finally murdered. The image of the tavern has come to be identified in the German collective memory with the violent act.

3. As part of the Bienalle's collateral events, the *Espace Louis Vuitton* presents Pierre Huyghe's famous work from 2005, *A Journey that Wasn't*, which has already achieved an important position in the history of contemporary art.

The installation in the *Espace Louis Vuitton* creates some difficulty in focusing attention on the work. The proximity of the display space and the store, with incomplete separation, invites disturbances. For example, while we were visiting, two women, who came from the store, stopped to take a look. One of them dozed off after a few minutes, while the other spoke loudly onto her cell phone throughout her stay and ignored requests by other visitors to terminate the call or leave the place. However, this is a great opportunity to rediscover Huyghe's excellent work.

Pierre Huyghe - Collage.jpg [48]



[49]Pierre Huyghe, A Journey that Wasn't, 2005

The film opens with a narrator describing the circumstances of going on a journey that never was: On February 9, 2005, an expedition of seven artists and ten crew members left the port of Ushuaia, the capital of Tierra del Fuego, in south-east Argentina. The expedition, initiated by Huyghe, set out to search for a mysterious creature, a solitary albino penguin, rumored to live on an unmapped island on the Arctic Circle, which the receding ice sheet has exposed. After the introduction, Huyghe's film joins together two events: footage of the journey (Arctic landscapes, the expedition's ship, and the crew working under harsh conditions), and its re-creation as a sophisticated audiovisual spectacle at the Central Park skating rink in New York. The misty Central Park scene adds a touch of science fiction to the work. Towards the end of the film the fictional creature – the albino penguin – the object of the journey, appears. Huyghe also places a stuffed version of the penguin in the exhibition space, hanging upside-down from the ceiling.

In a complex way, the work explores the relationship between truth and falsity, documentary and fictitious, the expedition that had gone on a journey and the "Journey that Wasn't," the imaginary creature and the stuffed albino penguin in the film and the exhibition space. By putting the two events together into "A Journey that Wasn't" and through the contradictions between what is seen and what has happened, Huyghe navigates between truth and fiction, suggesting that reality is so unbelievable that to tell it correctly it must be told as fiction.



Huyghe_Journey.jpg [50]



[51]Pierre Huyghe, A Journey that Wasn't, 2005

<u>"Faust" is on display at the German Pavilion in the Giardini</u> [52] as part of the 57th Venice Biennale through November 26, 2017.

<u>"The Boat is Leaking. The Captain lied."</u> [53] Is on display at the Fondazione Prada, Venice, through November 26, 2017.

<u>Pierre Huyghe's "A Journey that Wasn't"</u> [54] Is on display at the Espace Louis Vuitton, Venice, through November 26, 2017.



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[1] http://www.tohumagazine.com/sites/default/files/IMG_1246_0.JPG

[2] https://tohumagazine.com/file/img1257jpg-0

[3] http://www.tohumagazine.com/sites/default/files/IMG_1257_0.JPG

[4] https://tohumagazine.com/file/img1296jpg

[5] http://www.tohumagazine.com/sites/default/files/IMG_1296.JPG

[6] https://tohumagazine.com/file/img1294jpg

[7] http://www.tohumagazine.com/sites/default/files/IMG_1294.JPG

[8] https://tohumagazine.com/file/img1403jpg-0

[9] http://www.tohumagazine.com/sites/default/files/IMG_1403_0.JPG

[10] https://tohumagazine.com/file/img1335jpg

[11] http://www.tohumagazine.com/sites/default/files/IMG_1335.JPG

[12] https://tohumagazine.com/file/img1267jpg

[13] http://www.tohumagazine.com/sites/default/files/IMG_1267.JPG

[14] https://tohumagazine.com/file/img1383jpg

[15] http://www.tohumagazine.com/sites/default/files/IMG_1383.JPG

[16] https://tohumagazine.com/file/img1356jpg

[17] http://www.tohumagazine.com/sites/default/files/IMG_1356.JPG

[18] https://tohumagazine.com/file/img1285jpg

[19] http://www.tohumagazine.com/sites/default/files/IMG_1285.JPG

[20] https://tohumagazine.com/file/img1347jpg-0

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[22] https://tohumagazine.com/file/img1341jpg

[23] http://www.tohumagazine.com/sites/default/files/IMG_1341.JPG

[24] https://tohumagazine.com/file/img1363jpg-0

[25] http://www.tohumagazine.com/sites/default/files/IMG_1363_0.JPG

[26] https://tohumagazine.com/file/img1309jpg

[27] http://www.tohumagazine.com/sites/default/files/IMG_1309.JPG

[28] https://tohumagazine.com/file/img1295jpg

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[30] https://tohumagazine.com/file/fondazione-pradathe-boat-leaking5jpg

[31] http://www.tohumagazine.com/sites/default/files/Fondazione%20Prada_The%20Boat%20is%20L eaking_5.jpg

[32] https://tohumagazine.com/file/fondazione-pradathe-boat-leaking8jpg

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[44] https://tohumagazine.com/file/fondazione-pradathe-boat-leaking7jpg

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