

'GOOD ARTISTS KNOW THEIR RESPONSIBILITIES'

Christine Macel on *Viva Arte Viva*



Franz West, portrait, 1996. © photo Jens Preusse

By Nanda Janssen

Christine Macel is directing this year's Venice Biennale. As curator at the Centre Pompidou, she stood out for her penetrating and compelling exhibitions. Macel is a typical 'artist's curator' with a sharp eye for scenography. Do not expect any difficult concepts: the focus of *Viva Arte Viva* is on art and the artist. Nanda Janssen looked her up in Paris.

Christine Macel (born in 1969) might be fairly unknown in the Netherlands, but in Italy and France she already has a considerable record to her name. At previous Venice Biennales, she curated the national pavilions of France (Anri Sala, 2013) and Belgium (Eric Duyckaerts, 2007). At Centre Pompidou, where she started in 2000, Macel put together quite a number of strong exhibitions, such as the solo shows by Anri Sala (2012) and Philippe Parreno (2009) and the themed exhibitions *Les Promesses du Passé* (2010), concentrating on a neglected generation of artists from the former Eastern Bloc, and *Airs de Paris* (2007), which gave a podium to the Parisian scene. The exhibitions were notable for their beautiful and sophisticated design. Moreover, contemporary art received greater emphasis at the Pompidou under Macel's leadership. Not only did she set up a separate department for it, which she headed up herself; she also opened Espace 315, named after the square meters of floor space this museum room contains, and recently, Galerie o, a room in the middle of the permanent collection. Both spaces are dedicated entirely to current art.

Yet none of this has led to the stature and fame of several of her illustrious predecessors in Venice, such as Harald Szeemann, Massimiliano Gioni or Okwui Enwezor, curators who had already had big international events under their belt before tackling the Biennale. Moreover, they were not 'just' curators, but had headed up entire institutes as directors. Is Macel's relative obscurity possibly a consequence of her manner of working, with her focus on the artist? She confirms this. 'People often remember who the curator of a certain biennale was, but not who the artists that participated in it were. That is not normal. Hopefully, this time it will be the opposite. For the sake of my own egocentric satisfaction, of course, I hope people will not forget me immediately, but I would appreciate it tremendously if the artists that I show take their rightful place in today's and tomorrow's history; that people will indeed wonder why Sam Gilliam or Zilia Sánchez have remained in such obscurity until now; that broad recognition will come for Rasheed Araeen or Franz Erhard Walther, who have never been shown in Venice before.'

When asked about the reasons for appointing Christine Macel, Paolo Baratta, the president of the Biennale, remains vague. This lack of open-

ness breeds speculation. With the exception of the appointments of the Nigerian Okwui Enwezor (2015) and the American Robert Storr (2007), the Biennale is often directed by European curators. It has been a long time since the honour went to France (Jean Clair in 1995). Could the fact that France generates many visitors and that the Biennale sees Christine Macel as a magnet for the public be of importance here? Or do thematic considerations play a role and this time, after Enwezor, an extremely politically and socially driven curator of grand statements, has the board decided to take a softer approach that puts the emphasis not on the cerebral but on the experience? Be that as it may, it seems in any case that it is becoming more and more usual for the Venice Biennale to go along with the times and appoint a woman. After Maria de Corral and Rosa Martínez (2005), and Bice Curiger (2011), Macel is now the fourth member of that company.

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CHRISTINE
MACEL



She was born in Paris in 1969. Following her studies in art history, she was a curator of the heritage and inspector of artistic creation for the Délégation aux Arts Plastiques of the French Ministry of Culture (from 1995).

Since 2000 she has been Chief Curator at the Musée national d'art moderne - Centre Pompidou in Paris, where she is responsible for the Department of Création contemporaine et prospective, which she founded and developed.

For the Centre Pompidou she curated and co-curated many collective and solo exhibitions of artists such as Anri Sala (2012), Gabriel Orozco (2010) and Sophie Calle (2003).

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or the shaky beginnings of the human species...



Pauline Curnier Jardin, *Grotta Profunda, Approfundita*, 2011-2017, courtesy the artist and Ellen de Bruijne Projects

Unique voices

Rather than employing a single theme, Macel uses the open-ended motto 'long live art'. Might this be seen as a reaction to the often-heard criticism, particularly expressed by artists, that biennales are too heavily curated and that the art is nothing more than the illustration of a theme? Christine Macel shares that view: 'Working with the artist has always been my starting point. I am not someone who is concerned with weighty ideologies. I consider ideology to be an aspect that limits life.' The motto is carried through on all sorts of levels. In the run-up to the Biennale, a short film about one of the artists' working method is placed online each week. In the catalogue there are no theoretical treatments to be found, but rather visual or written contributions from the artists themselves.

In her statement, Macel writes that the artist has



Edith Dekyndt, *One and Thousand Nights*, 2016, installation view, Wiels, Brussels, courtesy of the artist and Greta Meert Gallery, Brussels, Carl Freedman Gallery, London, Karin Guenther Gallery, Hamburg, Konrad Fischer Gallery, Berlin

a unique voice, that art poses fundamental questions and signifies freedom. The big and unique role ascribed to the artist here is not unproblematic. In the current political climate it is almost a romantic escape: the artist as an innocent and altruistic figure who wants to tell us the truth. Is Macel not overestimating the artist? She laughs at my question: 'Perhaps I do idolize artists. That is the result of passion galore!' Then she continues seriously: 'Of course I know this is not always the case, but a good artist knows his or her responsibilities. I am speaking not only about political responsibility but also responsibilities as a person. A good artist often has the awareness to make other choices in society. Plato, the most accurate philosopher of all times, said that artists pose a threat to the stability of the city because of their awareness and ability to overthrow existing values. I do not find that romantic at all. Artists have always played a role in society – although nowadays there is a lack of artists who speak out, and here I am referring to the younger generation.' Macel sees art as a destabilizing element

and as the alternative in society.

So it is not just a party at *Viva Arte Viva*. Themes with a variety of worldviews are presented at nine pavilions. The first, *The Pavilion of Artists and Books*, is about the way in which artists in the post-internet age relate to the written word and to knowledge in the broader sense. *The Pavilion of Joys and Fears* zooms in on the ever greater role of emotions and impulses at a time when the world seems to be upside-down and the growing inequality is stirring up populism. The other seven pavilions, which are not located in the Giardini but in the Arsenale, focus on such topics as 'the common', 'earth', 'traditions', 'shaman', 'Dionysus (the woman)', 'colour' and finally, 'time and infinity'. Macel sees the pavilions as the chapters of a book. Rather than being individual buildings, the pavilions are themed sections that flow seamlessly

into one another. These 'transpavilions' would seem to be a wink of the eye to the national pavilions in the Giardini. A little redundantly, perhaps, as the central exhibition is in fact already a transpavilion because it includes artists from a wide variety of countries.

For those who read the newspaper regularly, this mix of topical and timeless themes is hardly new. The whole is not very cutting edge. The *Dionysian Pavilion*, for instance, celebrates the female body in all of its aspects. The art works supposedly cast a different eye on that body, one that is no longer steered by (male) desire, but an inner eye. The implicit male-female dichotomy this expresses is rather simplistic, certainly now that all kinds of other genders have come to the fore. Although this Biennale does not sound too exciting on paper, what is important in the end is the exhibition itself, of course. Considering Macel's reputation, the chances are that it will be convincing, generate new insights or even be surprisingly good.

The selection of artists is exceptionally balanced. With artists from more than fifty countries (out of



Edi Rama, *Untitled (New York)*, 2016, archival pigment inkjet print wallpaper, dimensions variable, courtesy of the artist and Marian Goodman Gallery



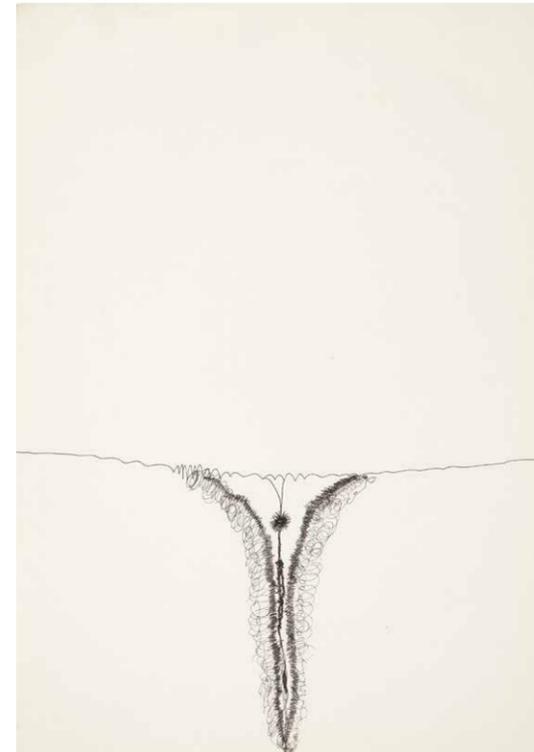
Takesada Matsutani, *Work 61*, 1961. Polyvinyl acetate adhesive, oil on canvas, 33.3 x 24.2 x 3 cm.
© Takesada Matsutani, courtesy the artist and Hauser & Wirth



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a total of 120 artists), one can justifiably speak of a global line-up. Forty percent are women, and the intergenerational aspect is also noteworthy. Macel is even including some fifteen deceased artists, as a kind of homage. So this is certainly not a Biennale focused on hyped young artists or market leaders (103 of the artists are represented in Venice for the first time). Can this selection be considered a counteract to the fact that biennales often show the same artists and

thereby contribute to the rapidly spiralling careers of artists? Macel says that 'it is indeed true that young or just discovered artists are often shown at biennales. But in the past few years we have also been seeing the opposite. Take for example the Venice Biennale directed by Massimiliano Gioni in 2013. He almost only presented the work of dead artists. His Biennale was a kind of return to history. That is an exception, however. I do not see my selection as a counteract, because



Huguette Caland, *Self Portrait*, 1971. ink on paper, 35.1 x 25.1 cm, courtesy of the Caland family

I have not reacted against anything, but instead have taken a positive point of view. I have never been busy with the latest fashions or with artists who circulate all over the place.'

Artists who give greater depth to the whole include the Syrian artist MARWAN, who died at an advanced age in Germany last year; Sheila Hicks, known for her colourful textile works; Ciprian Mureşan, one of the artists who put the Romanian city of Cluj on the map; Petrit Halilaj, with his wonderfully rarefied worlds; the Albanian artist and minister-president Edi Rama, and Takesada Matsutani, who was part of the Japanese Gutai group. And also some ten French artists – and no, that is not preferential treatment. Among them, naturally, are Anri Sala and Philippe Parreno; Kader Attia, winner of the Prix Marcel Duchamp in 2016 with an intriguing film about phantom pain; and Pauline Curmier Jardin, who is in residence at the Rijksakademie in Amsterdam. The only Dutch artist in the company is a dead one: Bas Jan Ader. The ninth and last pavilion, the one about time and infinity, would not be complete without him. His disappearance during a sailing voyage across the Atlantic Ocean in 1975 is an inexhaustible source of mythmaking. In Venice his work is placed directly opposite the lagoon.

NANDA JANSSEN

is a curator and a writer, and has a residency in La Cité Internationale des Arts in Paris with the support of the Mondrian Fund.

Translated from Dutch by Jane Bemont

Bron: Metropolis M, Venice Biennale 2017 Guide bij Metropolis M nr. 2, 2017



Liang Hao, *Eight Views of Xiaoxiang - Relics*, 2015-2016. ink on silk, 184 x 387 cm, private collection, photo courtesy of the artist

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