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The Art of Criticism: Rethinking the Role of the Art Critic in the Twenty-First Century

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The Art of Criticism: Rethinking the Role of the Art Critic in the Twenty-First Century



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Introduction

In 2022 Cecilia Alemani curated *The Milk of Dreams* International Art Exhibition in light of the 22nd Venice Biennial.¹ Her selection of artworks came together to express themes of transformation, and the humans' connection with nature and technology, under a feminist perspective. Feminism, while not explicitly mentioned by Alemani, was nevertheless alluded by the vast inclusion of female and non-binary artists, accompanied by texts from female and feminist writers, such as Donna Haraway and Silvia Federici.² The Venice Biennale is currently one of the most prestigious art exhibitions in the world. As a result, Alemani's aesthetic and contextual approach is extremely relevant to academic questions exploring the merits based on which art is being assessed today, and the current possible relation of the evaluation process with art criticism. A preliminary research into art criticism however, can only create doubts relating to several professors' and critics' statements about today's crisis in the field.³

Art historian James Elkins wrote in 2009 that

“art criticism is constitutionally in fundamental disarray: it often denies that it has a relevant history; it agrees to disagree about its purpose; and it routinely avoids confronting the absence of a plausible theory of critical judgment.”⁴

According to the historian, even though the discipline is aware of those foundational issues, the conversation is usually steered towards the restrictions created by market and institutional pressures.⁵ A few years later, in 2013, Professor of Philosophy of Art and Culture Thijs Lijster added another deterring factor to Elkins' already troubling remarks; the existence of non-institutional critics, such as celebrities and bloggers, who often draw the focus and the public's trust from the professionals.⁶ Given all those drawbacks however, the amount of professional art criticism readily available on the web and printed press is immense.⁷

¹ Alemani, “Statement.”

² Hansen, *59th International Art Exhibition Catalogue*.

³ Elkins, “Questionnaire on ‘The Contemporary’,” 11; Lijster, “Where is the Critic?”; Elkins, *The State of Art Criticism*.

⁴ Elkins, “Questionnaire on ‘The Contemporary’,” 11.

⁵ *Ibid*, 11.

⁶ Lijster, “Where is the Critic?”

⁷ *Ibid*, 37; Elkins, *The State of Art Criticism*.

It seems then, that contemporary art critics are fighting an already lost battle against the lack of theory and purpose, and their denial of the history of art criticism, while the space for critical judgement has been taken over by ordinary art enthusiasts, institutions, such as museums and art galleries, and the art market.⁸ If this premise were true, there would be no reason at all for professional critics to write art criticism. What is proposed in this paper instead, in answer to Elkins' statement, is that art criticism not only has a complete history of various productive theories but also, that professionals in the field today often return to the discipline's history, even if they do not state it explicitly, to create important and necessary discourse around art. This can become evident through the examination of the past and current roles of art criticism, which need to be understood, to also comprehend today's condition of the field. Therefore, the focus of this thesis will fall solely on art critical texts and relative theories. Certain artworks will be briefly mentioned to provide context for the selected exhibition, *The Milk of Dreams*, but a visual analysis of those works will not be included as it falls out of the scope of this study.

Status Quaestionis

There have been various discussions about the history of art criticism in the academic field, as well as an endeavour to determine the field's contemporary role. Most of the research available is either focused on a historical overview of art criticism or the identification of one single function of the discipline in the contemporary era, to counter argue the generally accepted claim that art criticism today is facing a crisis.⁹ Art historian and critic Kerr Houston offers an overview of the history of art criticism, followed by an evaluation and comments on personal writing styles in his book titled *An Introduction to Art Criticism: Histories, Strategies, Voices*.¹⁰ Art history scholar Richard Wrigley has also been occupied with the history of the field, showing a specific interest in the eighteenth and early nineteenth century criticism.¹¹ In his book *The Origins of French Art Criticism: From the Ancien Regime to the Restoration* (1993), he offers a detailed analysis of the French critical production around the French Academic Salons and analyses critical texts of the time. Furthermore, Wrigley briefly

⁸ Elkins, "Questionnaire on 'The Contemporary'," 11; Lijster, "Where is the Critic?"; Elkins, *The State of Art Criticism*.

⁹ Houston, *An Introduction to Art Criticism*; Elkins, "Questionnaire on 'The Contemporary'," 11; Lijster, "Where is the Critic?"; Elkins, *The State of Art Criticism*.

¹⁰ Houston, *An Introduction to Art Criticism*.

¹¹ Wrigley, *The Origins of French Art Criticism*; Wrigley, "Ways of Seeing at the Salon."

mentions the value of studying the history of art criticism and especially the era of the Salons, before writing about contemporary art in his article ‘Ways of Seeing at the Salon’. This way, he creates a connection between past theories, specifically of the time of Denis Diderot, and current art critical practices. Moreover, there is a vast number of commentators on the most important critics throughout history. Examples which this paper will include, among others, are art historian T. J. Clark who comments on Clement Greenberg’s formalism, as well as philosophy, art, and culture scholar Thijs Lijster who discusses the common elements in the dialogue between Theodor Adorno (1903-1969) and Walter Benjamin (1892-1940).¹²

The matter of the state of art criticism today has also been thoroughly discussed. Art historian James Elkins has commented on the status of art criticism in the twenty-first century in his book *The State of Art Criticism* in 2008, as well as in his essay in ‘Questionnaire on “The Contemporary”’ by Hal Foster et al. for *October Magazine* in 2009.¹³ In both texts, the current situation in the field is presented as troubling and the historian is primarily focused on the challenges the discipline is facing in the twenty-first century; the lack of recognition regarding the discipline’s history, the inconsistency in matters of a specific purpose, and the field’s theoretical inadequacy. Lijster also comments on the challenges of art criticism in his text ‘Where is the Critic?’ from 2013.¹⁴ An additional controversial aspect of the discipline Lijster discusses in the same text is the existence of non-institutional criticism, coming from ordinary people in the digital sphere and celebrities, such as Oprah, who promote works of art or exhibitions. While for Elkins a resolution of those issues is not possible, Lijster’s conclusion assigns to art criticism the singular task of reintroducing the value of aesthetics to the audience.¹⁵ As will be established in this paper, this cannot be the only function of today’s art critical practices.

The Walker Arts Center in Minneapolis organised in 2015 a discussion panel between the art critics Ryan Schreiber of Pitchfork, Isaac Fitzgerald from BuzzFeed Books, and Christopher Knight from LA Times in light of the conference *Superscript: Arts Journalism & Criticism in a Digital Age*, where they discussed art criticism in the digital age.¹⁶ The experts addressed what they consider to be their obligations as critics, without examining specific reviews or exhibitions. Other panels on the nature of art criticism have been organised more recently, such as ‘The Constructive Critic’ by the ACT Writers Centre in 2019 and ‘What

¹² Clark, “Clement Greenberg's Theory of Art”; Lijster, *Benjamin and Adorno*.

¹³ Elkins, *The State of Art Criticism*; Elkins, “Questionnaire on ‘The Contemporary’,” 11.

¹⁴ Lijster, “Where is the Critic?”

¹⁵ Elkins, *The State of Art Criticism*; Lijster, “Where is the Critic?”

¹⁶ Schreiber, Fitzgerald, Knight and Gat, “Superscript 2015 Panel.”

Makes a Good Art Critic?’ by the University of Washington in April of 2024.¹⁷ However, these are not widely available to the public. This study will constitute an endeavour to discern contemporary roles of art criticism and to see how those can be connected to the field’s historical functions. This attempt will allow for a better understanding of the current condition of art criticism in the conclusion of the thesis.

Research Question and Sub-Questions

Following the Status Quaestionis, the main research question of this thesis is: What are the contemporary roles of art criticism in relation to the field’s history? This question will be approached through a critical analysis of the criticism around *The Milk of Dreams* exhibition of the 59th Venice Biennial. In order to answer this question, it is necessary to identify the role art criticism has had historically and the field’s theoretical foundation. Therefore, the first sub-question will be: What were historically the roles of art criticism? As the examination of the field’s recent status is also important in the process of understanding what challenges art criticism has been facing and the current way art critics perceive their roles, the second sub-question will be: What is the current condition of art criticism? The third sub-question will revolve around the critical reviews regarding *The Milk of Dreams* exhibition and their relation to the field’s historical roles and ways of assessing art: Based on the reviews around the 59th Venice Biennial, which current roles of art criticism can be identified?

Case Study

This thesis is an endeavour to determine how art criticism today relates to its history since the eighteenth century, by examining the field’s roles and significance, as those are identified through historical and recent art critical texts. Thus, one exhibition case study has been selected, *The Milk of Dreams* curated by Cecilia Alemani in light of the 59th Venice Biennial, which offers a wide range of art critical approaches.¹⁸ This exhibition has been specifically selected because it touches upon an abundance of topics for discussion. The exhibition’s feminist, aesthetic, environmental, and political discourses around contemporary and modern art, as those will be discussed more elaborately in the third chapter, were proven to be

¹⁷ Whispering Gums, “The Constructive Critic”; Henry, “What Makes a Good Art Critic?”

¹⁸ La Biennale di Venezia, “59th International Art Exhibition.”

controversial and resulted in mixed reviews. As the Venice Biennial is one of the most important and innovative events of the art world, the critical response to its exhibitions can be seen as representative of the field of art criticism. Moreover, due to the event's status, it is to be expected that established art critics would not miss the opportunity of commenting on the Biennial, if they wish for their practice to be relevant to the broader contemporary discussions about art.

The included reviews regarding *The Milk of Dreams* are all written from professional critics in order to highlight how in each case the writer focused on different aspects of the exhibition.¹⁹ The texts were selected based on the importance of the mediums of publication, such as *Art Monthly*, *Artnet* and *Art Review*, which are prominent sources of information for art professionals, as well as the writers' achievements in the field of art criticism, as will be further explained in the third chapter of this paper. Furthermore, as will be established in the first two chapters of this study, art criticism often revolved around the tension between the concepts of aesthetics and context, which was accentuated in the twenty-first century. Thus, the reviews of Marco Baravalle and Rosalyn D'Mello have been included, specifically because of the critics' focus on the exhibition's conceptual elements. Four of the critiques are directed to the general audience, while one, Baravalle's, is referring to an academic audience. The variations in approach, main subjects, and writing style will be examined, as they can bring fourth fruitful conclusions regarding how each author perceives their assumed task of writing art criticism and what art critical functions are possibly revealed by their texts. The analysis of the case study will grant a better understanding of the current condition of art criticism.

Methodology

This study will be comprised by the use of literary and comparative analysis to determine the roles of art criticism throughout history and now. It will be separated into three chapters. The first chapter, titled 'Roles and Functions of Art Criticism Through its Historical Evolution', follows the history of art criticism since its official appearance in the eighteenth century, until the late twentieth century. The method of literary analysis will be used for the identification of different criteria based on which art was assessed by critics, as well as the roles those

¹⁹ Clarke, "59th Venice Biennale"; Davis, "The 2022 Venice Biennale"; Rappolt, "59th Venice Biennale Review"; Baravalle, "*The Milk of Dreams*"; D'Mello, "The 59th Venice Art Biennale."

critics took on in relation to the public debate around art. Professor Houston's text regarding the history of the field, along with Professor Wrigley's book on French art criticism at the time of the Salons, will be included in order to establish the chronological order and historical circumstances within which each approach was conceived.²⁰ As certain thinkers' theories, such as Benjamin, Adorno, Greenberg and Fried, will require a deeper analysis to understand which roles they attributed to art criticism, texts with original theories will be provided, such as Greenberg's essay 'Towards a Newer Laocoon', or secondary sources, such as Lijster's book on Benjamin and Adorno.²¹ Those texts will be jointly discussed to provide a clear overview of the objectives and roles of art criticism throughout its history.

The second chapter of this thesis, titled 'The Role of Art Criticism in the Twenty-First Century', will include the literary analysis of Professor Thijs Lijster's, Professor James Elkin's, curator Miwon Kwon's, and art critic John McDonald's observations on the crisis of contemporary art criticism, to create a clear outline of the current state of the discipline in the twenty-first century.²² The conversation of the 'Superscript 2015 Panel: Credibility, Criticism, Collusion' on art criticism in the digital age will also be examined, as it offers insight to how contemporary art critics perceive their professional roles.²³ This will allow for the understanding of whether art is still judged on the same merits as during the field's history through the use of the comparative analysis method. A section of this chapter will be dedicated to the literary analysis around feminist criticism, with the introduction of texts by feminist critics and academics Amelia Jones, Katy Deepwell and Kate Mondloch, as feminism played an important role in the case study exhibition, *The Milk of Dreams*, which will be examined in the third chapter.²⁴

The third chapter of the thesis, titled 'Case Study of The 59th Venice Biennial', will include an analysis of art critical reviews around *The Milk of Dreams* International Exhibition of the Venice Biennial in 2022.²⁵ Those will be examined as primary sources to highlight different functions of art criticism today. This process will aid the understanding of the most prominent roles of art criticism and their significance, as those are implied by professional critics. The method of comparative analysis will be employed in an effort to understand the

²⁰ Houston, *An Introduction to Art Criticism*; Wrigley, *The Origins of French Art Criticism*.

²¹ Greenberg, "Towards a Newer Laocoon"; Lijster, *Benjamin and Adorno*.

²² Elkins, "Questionnaire on 'The Contemporary'," 10-11; Elkins, "On the Absence of Judgement in Art Criticism"; McDonald, "The Role of the Art Critic"; Kwon, "Questionnaire on 'The Contemporary,'" 13-15.

²³ Schreiber, Fitzgerald, Knight and Gat "Superscript 2015 Panel."

²⁴ Jones, "Contemporary Feminism"; Mondloch, "The Difference Problem"; Deepwell, "Art Criticism."

²⁵ La Biennale di Venezia, "59th International Exhibition"; Clarke, "59th Venice Biennale"; Davis, "The 2022 Venice Biennale"; Rappolt, "59th Venice Biennale Review"; Baravalle, "*The Milk of Dreams*"; D'Mello, "The 59th Venice Art Biennale."

evolution of art criticism and to discern whether connections between past critical theories and current art critical practices can be made. Distinctly, most of the selected theories in this paper either explain the history of art criticism in a retrospective manner or arrive at specific conclusions in regards to art critical functions or connections of the discipline with its past. This study will group those sporadic attempts together, to prove that the diversity in art critical practices is not a new condition of the twenty-first century, and, therefore, does not constitute a crisis.

Chapter 1. Roles and Functions of Art Criticism Through its Historical Evolution

To comprehend how contemporary art criticism relates to the field's history since the eighteenth century, it is important to understand what were the most important art critical functions of the discipline in the past. In this chapter the history of art criticism will be explored, based on Kerr Houston's book *An Introduction to Art Criticism: Histories, Strategies, Voices*.²⁶ Houston's account, however, is mostly a chronological summary of the discipline's history and does not divulge in specific details on each theory. In order to provide further input into each time period, additional sources will be added, such as *The Origins of French Art Criticism: From the Ancien Regime to the Restoration* (1993) by Professor Richard Wrigley.²⁷ Professor Wrigley's book is a very detailed analysis of the early stages of art criticism and offers deep insight on the discourse between the eighteenth century critics in France. Moreover, specific theories of the most important minds in the field will be analysed, with the inclusion of sources such as Professor Lijster's book *Benjamin and Adorno on Art and Art Criticism: Critique of Art*.²⁸ Professor Lijster, who has written extensively on past and current theories of art criticism, closely examines the arguments of the two thinkers as well as their common points and differences. Considering Professor Elkins' statement that art criticism often disregards its history and specific purpose, this chapter's objective is to assess the role of art criticism in each era and identify the different criteria used to evaluate art.²⁹ This endeavour will facilitate the examination of the current roles of art criticism and how those relate to the field's history in the following chapters.

1.1. Origins of Art Criticism: Eighteenth and Nineteenth Century in Europe

According to Professor Houston the term art criticism was first used in the early eighteenth century, by painter and writer Jonathan Richardson the Elder (1667-1745).³⁰ The artist

²⁶ Houston has been teaching art criticism, art history and aesthetics in the Maryland Institute College of Art since 2002, and since 2013, he has been a Co-Director and Instructor of *Venice Then and Now*, for which he also taught summer courses on art criticism in conjunction with the 2013, 2015 and 2017 Venice Biennials. Houston, "Curriculum Vitae"; Houston, *An Introduction to Art Criticism*.

²⁷ Wrigley, *The Origins of French Art Criticism*.

²⁸ Lijster, *Benjamin and Adorno*.

²⁹ Elkins, "Questionnaire on 'The Contemporary'," 11. The abundance of art critical theories, does not allow for every thinker to be included in this text. Since such a task would diverge from the chapter's original objective, only the most prominent approaches on art criticism have been selected.

³⁰ Houston however highlights that there have been sporadic critical discussions about art since the first century BCE. Houston, *An Introduction to Art Criticism*, 23-25.

analysed in a series of books the elements, such as composition, invention, drawing, which could contribute to the quality of a painting. Those categories, which ultimately reveal a focus on the artworks' formal aspects, provided the vocabulary which could be used by the English middle class, when discussing art. Richardson's books in turn, suggested the discipline's first function; discussing the success of art. Around 1740, with the establishment of the Academic Salons in Paris, the practice of art criticism took an important step, by being regularly expressed in written form in pamphlets dispersed outside the Salon exhibitions.

Houston and Wrigley both agree that in the eighteenth and early nineteenth century, art criticism was mainly developed in France, around the Academic Salons.³¹ According to Houston, the Salons' most prominent critical figure was Denis Diderot (1713-1784).³² Diderot favoured paintings which represented reality so successfully, that the viewer could become absorbed in their aesthetic qualities.³³ He often showed preference for the works of Jean-Baptiste-Simeon Chardin (Figure 1) and Hubert Robert (Figure 2).³⁴ Diderot believed that criticism was to succeed in periods after rich artistic production, from which Wrigley deduces that, for Diderot, art criticism's function was to evaluate the decline in creative quality.³⁵ Moreover, Diderot argued that most of the opinions he expressed, were the outcome of listening to various conversations of the audience: "I have collected the statement of the old man and the thought of the child, the judgement of the man of letters, the word of the man of the world, and the remarks of the masses."³⁶ This statement already exposes a key debate in art criticism in relation to the subjective and objective positions a critic can adopt when writing about art. Wrigley mentions that Diderot selectively decided which of the public's diverse judgments to reproduce.³⁷ Diderot's practice however, reveals his interest in being a spokesperson on behalf of the Salons' audience.

As Houston explains, since the Salons became open and free to the public in 1737, critics took on the role of representatives of public opinion.³⁸ According to Wrigley, the critics commented not only on the quality of the artworks, but on every aspect of the Salons,

³¹ Wrigley, *The Origins of French Art Criticism*, 40; Houston, *An Introduction to Art Criticism*, 25-36.

³² Houston, *An Introduction to Art Criticism*, 30.

³³ *Ibid.*; "The painter who can express but a moment of time has not been able to represent so many symptoms of dissolution as the poet but they are much more affecting; the painter shows us reality, whereas the expressions of the poet and the musician are but symbols." Denis Diderot in Holt, "Denis Diderot," 23.

³⁴ Holt, "Denis Diderot," 23-24.

³⁵ Wrigley, *The Origins of French Art Criticism*, 168.

³⁶ "J'ai recueilli la sentence du vieillard et la pensée de l'enfant, le jugement de l'homme de lettres, le mot de l'homme du monde, et les propos du peuple" Denis Diderot in Wrigley, *The Origins of French Art Criticism*, 87, translated by the author.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 87, 103.

³⁸ Houston, *An Introduction to Art Criticism*, 26, 28.

such as the amount and the status of visitors, the Academy's stance towards the public, and the curatorial choices.³⁹ Subsequently, the critics were responsible for maintaining high standards regarding the overall quality of the exhibitions on behalf of the audience.⁴⁰ Professor Wrigley remarks that a few critics, starting with d'Angiviller (1730-1809), also recognised the exhibitions' importance as a display of national art.⁴¹ Towards the end of the century, because of the changing political landscape which resulted in the French Revolution of 1789, criticism functioned as a political tool for writers to dispute the authority of the Academy, and the King.⁴² In 1806, when art criticism had lost its political influence due to the changes derived by the Revolution, art critic Pierre-Jean-Baptiste Chaussard (1766-1823) claimed that critics were tasked with interpreting public opinion instead of passively repeating it.⁴³ Art Critic Toussaint-Bernard Émeric-David (1755-1839) on the other hand, attributed didactic qualities to criticism, arguing that critics have the opportunity to educate popular taste.⁴⁴

The prevailing opinion that the public was guided by critics, often deterred the artists' will to participate in the Salons at the beginning of the nineteenth century.⁴⁵ In this climate, artists went in search of innovation, which created new discourses in art criticism. Critics such as Stendhal (1783-1842) and Théophile Gautier (1811-1872) supported the new ideas of Romanticism, which were based on intuition and individual experience.⁴⁶ Others, such as the more traditional Delécluze (1781-1863), still coveted neoclassical elements in art, which reflected order and a renewed interest in Greek and Roman antiquity. Charles Baudelaire (1821-1867) entered the critical dialogue in 1845, with a deeply personal writing style, focused on commenting on the artworks' effects, instead of simply describing them.⁴⁷ Being generally dismissive of the current debates, he urged artists to create new traditions, inspired by everyday urban life.

³⁹ Wrigley, *The Origins of French Art Criticism*, 58-64, 100, 102-103, 107-108.

⁴⁰ *Ibid*, 167.

⁴¹ *Ibid*, 39.

⁴² *Ibid*, 98.

⁴³ *Ibid*, 114.

⁴⁴ *Ibid*, 115.

⁴⁵ *Ibid*, 118.

⁴⁶ Houston, *An Introduction to Art Criticism*, 34-36; *The Oxford Dictionary for Arts and Artists*, "Romanticism"; *Ibid*, "Neoclassicism."

⁴⁷ "...criticism should be partial, impassioned, political-that is to say, formed from an exclusive point of view, but also from a point of view that opens up the greatest number of horizons." Charles Baudelaire in Houston, *An Introduction to Art Criticism*, 40; *Ibid*, 40-41.

In 1863, because of the intense complaints that followed the great amount of works rejected by the official Academy Salons, Napoleon III established the Salon des Refusés.⁴⁸ There, artworks by modernist painters, such as James McNeill Whistler's *Girl in White* (Figure 3), and Edouard Manet's *Luncheon in the Grass* (Figure 4), faced considerable negative criticism by the more conservative critics, such as Antonin Proust (1832-1905), because of their provocative subjects and seemingly unfinished technique.⁴⁹ Those artists found support from Emile Zola (1840-1902), who advocated towards original and subjective elements in artistic production. By the end of the century, modernist painters, including Paul Gauguin, Edgar Degas and George Seurat, were becoming more established with the aid of reviews from Joris-Karl (J.-K.) Huysmans (1848-1907) and Félix Fénéon (1861-1944), who rejected classicism.

In the eighteenth and nineteenth century, France might have been the epicentre of art criticism, but it was not the only country in Europe where the discipline was developed.⁵⁰ In eighteenth century Germany, art historian Johann Joachim Winckelmann (1717-1768) was the main critical figure. Art Historian Francis Haskell explains that Winckelmann studied the art of ancient civilizations in order to identify the conditions which allowed art to flourish or decline in each particular period or location.⁵¹ As a result, Winckelmann attributed what he believed to be the artistic superiority of the Greeks, to the connection between artistic production and political history. More specifically, he argued that "it is to liberty above all that art is indebted for its progress and its perfection".⁵²

By the beginning of the nineteenth century, romanticism gathered most of the interest of philosophers, namely Johann Wolfgang Goethe (1749-1832) and G. W. F. Hegel (1770-1831).⁵³ Hegel, similarly to Winckelmann, had a nostalgic view of the past. As Professor of Philosophy Karsten Harries explains, Hegel asserted that art had already reached its highest point before his time, during periods such as the Greek Antiquity and the Middle Ages.⁵⁴ Moreover, Hegel believed that in his era it was difficult for the intrinsic connection between truth and art to be preserved, which was an important contributing factor in the loss of artistic quality. He attributed this shortcoming to the fact that art, in his epoch, required more

⁴⁸ Leader, "Paris's Salon des Refusés Opens," 1099.

⁴⁹ Houston, *An Introduction to Art Criticism*, 42-44.

⁵⁰ *Ibid*, 37.

⁵¹ Haskell, *History and its Images*, 218-220.

⁵² Johann Joachim Winckelmann in *Ibid*, 220.

⁵³ Houston, *An Introduction to Art Criticism*, 37.

⁵⁴ Harries, "Hegel on the Future of Art," 678-684, 689.

reflection than in the past and thus, as Professor Harries observes, the artistic occupation was dependent on the critics' deliberations.⁵⁵

English critics during the eighteenth century saw art criticism as a side activity.⁵⁶ The debate in England was centred primarily around art education, with the first Academy of Painting founded in 1711 by Sir Godfrey Kneller (1646-1723).⁵⁷ The field became more established by the end of the century, when newspapers started including sections with exhibition reviews.⁵⁸ The most prominent English critics of the nineteenth century were William Hazlitt (1778-1830) and John Ruskin (1819-1900). Hazlitt was a philosopher, critic and painter who believed that art has the ability to “reinforce a natural tendency in humankind toward the good.”⁵⁹ Ruskin was an advocate of a return to nature in art and in his book *Modern Painters* (1843), he offered deep analysis of the natural elements included in William Turner's abstract landscapes (Figure 5).⁶⁰ Henry Cole (1808-1882), another important figure in England at the time, advocated for a connection between art and industrial design.⁶¹ He took part in the proposal of the *Great Exhibition of the Works of Industry of All Nations* in 1851 and was the first director of the South Kensington Museum, which was renamed Victoria and Albert Museum in 1899.⁶² As the twentieth century approached, critics who supported naturalist work were being cast aside.⁶³ As will become clear in the next section, artists and critics alike became more attracted to abstract subject matters.

1.2. Art Criticism in the Twentieth Century

Critics of twentieth century Europe, as previously explained, shifted their support from works with naturalistic features, to abstract compositions. In France, those new ideas paved the road for the reviews of Guillaume Apollinaire (1880-1918), who is accredited with the invention of the terms orphism and surrealism.⁶⁴ In England, the newfound interest in abstract elements in art, brought forth the formalist philosophies of Roger Fry (1866-1934) and Clive Bell (1881-1964). The two critics argued that the most important element of an artwork is its pure

⁵⁵ Ibid, 689.

⁵⁶ Houston, *An Introduction to Art Criticism*, 31.

⁵⁷ MacDonald, *The History and Philosophy of Art Education*, 27.

⁵⁸ Houston, *An Introduction to Art Criticism*, 32, 36, 38.

⁵⁹ Ibid, 36.

⁶⁰ Ibid, 38.

⁶¹ *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, “Sir Henry Cole.”

⁶² Ibid, “World's Fair”. Whitehead, “Henry Cole's European Travels”, 207, 209.

⁶³ Houston, *An Introduction to Art Criticism*, 44.

⁶⁴ Ibid, 45-49.

form and thus, the subject matter should be ignored. According to Houston formalism allowed for the integration of Asian and African art in the conversation, whose subject matter was unfamiliar to Europeans of the time. Regarding the Interwar period (1918-1939), Houston remarks that criticism in France mostly served as a tool of manipulation of the art market, which created doubts about whether the field still held any value within the artworld.⁶⁵ In England however, the writings of Herbert Read (1893-1968) on modern art and art's importance to life and education came to the forefront of critical discussions.⁶⁶ The critic later devoted his focus to the promotion of some of the most important British artists of his century, such as Henri Moore, Ben Nicholson and Barbara Hepworth.

At the same time in Germany, a philosophical approach to criticism emerged through the writings of Walter Benjamin (1892-1940) and Theodor Adorno (1903-1969).⁶⁷ According to Professor Thijs Lijster, both philosophers had a similar appreciation of the role of criticism in art.⁶⁸ For Benjamin the role of art criticism is not simply judging a work of art, but more so completing it, an opinion which consequently renders art criticism equally important to the artwork itself.⁶⁹ Adorno, on the other hand, believed that one of the characteristics of art is that, only through criticism and reflection upon it, one can truly experience it.⁷⁰ Therefore art cannot exist, if there is no element in it that needs interpretation. As Lijster explains then, for both thinkers "criticism and art are mutually dependent and of equal importance".⁷¹

Both philosophers had a political approach to art criticism. Benjamin, who was a Marxist, underlined the importance in understanding that art made by means of reproducibility, such as photography, separates itself from ritual and instead gains a political function.⁷² While authentic art's value lies in its existence, reproduced art gains its value from being shown. Therefore, reproduced art can easily distract its audience and be used by fascist regimes which attempt to highlight the aesthetic qualities of war and politics. Adorno argued that the culture industry, which is controlled by those with financial means, manipulates the masses by answering to their needs.⁷³ Moreover, he believed that criticism is necessary for

⁶⁵ "If art criticism did not serve a purpose, art dealers would not have it done." Pierre Mille in Houston, *An Introduction to Art Criticism*, 49.

⁶⁶ Ibid, 50; McKeever, "Herbert Read"; University of Leeds, "Man Behind the Moderns."

⁶⁷ Houston, *An Introduction to Art Criticism*, 50; Lijster, *Benjamin and Adorno*, 229.

⁶⁸ Lijster, *Benjamin and Adorno*, 16.

⁶⁹ Ibid, 232.

⁷⁰ Ibid, 267.

⁷¹ Ibid, 287.

⁷² Benjamin, "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction."

⁷³ Horkheimer and Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, 95-97.

democracy, as democracy requires political maturity; the ability to think and speak for oneself, instead of ignorantly accepting already existing conventions.⁷⁴

In the United States, the Armory Show in 1913 constituted a pivotal moment in the tradition of art criticism in the country.⁷⁵ From that point forward American art criticism shifted its focus towards an international dialogue. Furthermore, the exhibition signified the point in time when American artists broke the bond with the European artistic traditions, recognising opportunities for original artistic creation. The show gathered a lot of negative criticism by American critics in publications such as *The New York Times* and *Brooklyn Life* for its inclusion of European art.⁷⁶ The discourse on modern art in the following years, along with the increasingly important role of New York as a centre for art, partly due to the First World War (1914-1918), cultivated the new ideas of critics known as “experientialists”.⁷⁷ They wrote in favour of the ideas of William James (1842-1910) and John Dewey (1859-1952), who believed that art is created as a result of its cultural context. This premise initiated a shift towards the assessment of the subject matter of art, instead of its aesthetic elements, and influenced a great part of the critical production of the rest of the century. Distinctly, the Great Depression (1929-1939) enforced this contextual approach on art criticism, and broke ground for the writings of Meyer Shapiro (1904-1996), who believed that modern artworks are linked to the artists’ life within the modern society. Art criticism gained this way a new function; the evaluation of art within its specific context, such as the cultural or socioeconomic conditions from which it is born.

The decades following the 1940s saw the establishment of a series of art publications such as *ARTnews*, *ARTS* and, in 1962, *Art Forum*.⁷⁸ The same period is also characterised by the rise of the critics Leo Steinberg (1920-2011), Harold Rosenberg (1906-1978), and Clement Greenberg (1909-1994). Although Leo Steinberg was a formalist, art historian Richard Brilliant applauds the critic’s understanding of the difficulty in new artistic practices, which often challenged the importance of form as well as content.⁷⁹ Rosenberg stressed the

⁷⁴ Adorno, *Critical Models*, 281-282.

⁷⁵ Gherasim, “American Art Criticism between the Cultural and the Ideological (I),” 95-97; Gherasim, “American Art Criticism between the Cultural and the Ideological (II),” 21.

⁷⁶ Houston, *An Introduction to Art Criticism*, 52-53.

⁷⁷ *Ibid*, 53-55.

⁷⁸ *Ibid*, 57-63.

⁷⁹ “Steinberg’s essay ‘Jasper Johns: The First Seven Years of His Art’ (1962), also included in the collection, makes clear how difficult it was for even so practiced a viewer to comprehend something so apparently unprecedented. Yet there was an awareness that something arrestingly powerful was on display, demanding respectful attention, and not just because Johns’s work was being exhibited in a gallery, which qualified the status of his work as ‘art’.” Brilliant, “On or About Leo Steinberg,” 33.

shift of modern art, towards the action of painting.⁸⁰ According to the critic, the American action painters distance the “event” of creation from aesthetic aspirations, since action does not depend on taste. As Rosenberg’s writings lost their popularity in the 1960s, Clement Greenberg’s support of formalism gained progressively more ground.⁸¹ Even though both critics had a Marxist political upbringing, they ended up expressing antagonistic views on art criticism.⁸²

Greenberg, who had already been active since the 1930s, had shown early on a talent for recognizing emerging artists, such as Jackson Pollock and David Smith.⁸³ In his essay ‘Towards a Newer Laocoon’, Greenberg expresses that abstract art is a result of its social and historical context, similarly to the aforementioned experientialists.⁸⁴ However, his argument quickly shifts to an appreciation of formalism. American abstract expressionists, according to Greenberg, continued the artistic traditions of Europe, with a twist.⁸⁵ They realised that the abstract elements in music, namely music’s incapability to convey anything else other than pure sentiments, can allow their art to escape from its subject matter and express its medium specificity.⁸⁶ This way, each abstract artwork, painting or sculpture, expressed the characteristics of its medium; the flatness of the canvas or the material used for a sculpture. Moreover, he explained, only when art can accept the limitations of said medium, it can be pure. Even though Greenberg’s approach was deeply formalist, he recognised that it is based solely on his own experience and should not be seen as valid for any period in the history of art, or even the discipline’s future. The critic found support by a group of intellectual critics, such as Michael Fried (1939-now) and Rosalind Krauss (1941-now).⁸⁷

Michael Fried, influenced by Greenberg, highlights the need for a critic who aspires to remain objective and who understands modernist art as art concerned by issues intrinsic to itself.⁸⁸ Fried’s most well-known writing is his essay ‘Art and Objecthood’, where he talks

⁸⁰ Rosenberg, “The American Action Painters,” 22-23, 49-50.

⁸¹ Orton, “Action, Revolution and Painting,” 3; Houston, *An Introduction to Art Criticism*, 61.

⁸² Clark, “Clement Greenberg’s Theory of Art,” 140; Orton, “Action, Revolution and Painting,” 6; Foster, “Clement Greenberg,” 20.

⁸³ Orton, “Action, Revolution and Painting,” 3; Houston, *An Introduction to Art Criticism*, 60; Schwartz, “Art Criticism,” 535; “Where can you read art criticism that discusses a contemporary work, and at the very moment of its blossoming (because one must remember that outside a small circle, Pollock was a nobody in 1946), with the terms customarily reserved for the great masters of the past, and yet without sparing specific reproaches.” de Duve, *Clement Greenberg*, 18.

⁸⁴ Greenberg, “Towards a Newer Laocoon,” 23.

⁸⁵ Groys, “Clement Greenberg’s ‘Art and Culture’, 1961,” 180-181; Greenberg, “Towards a Newer Laocoon”; Foster, “Clement Greenberg,” 22.

⁸⁶ Greenberg, “Towards a Newer Laocoon,” 31-37.

⁸⁷ Houston, *An Introduction to Art Criticism*, 61-62.

⁸⁸ Fried, “Modernist Painting,” 642-644, 647.

about minimalism, which he views as theatrical art because it demands the viewer's spatial presence.⁸⁹ According to Fried, those kinds of artworks cannot be perceived as art at all, as they exist in a state between art and object. Michael Fried was not the only critic affected by Greenberg's writings. Rosalind Krauss also based her writings on Greenberg's formalism for most of the 1960s.⁹⁰ By 1972 though, she challenged Greenberg's idea of medium specificity as the most important element of current artistic practices. Instead, she focused on the artwork's relationship with the viewer by stating that "One's own perspective, like one's own age, is the only orientation one will ever have."⁹¹ In 1976 Krauss became the editor of the journal *October*.⁹² The magazine often featured critical essays based on Marxist theory, as the idea that culture is influenced by the economic and social aspects of society had been dominating since the beginning of the century.⁹³

The decade after the introduction of the second wave of feminism in 1960, marked the establishment of short-lived, due to lack of support, feminist art periodicals.⁹⁴ At the same time, female art critics initiated a shift of focus towards the work of women artists. The feminist voices of Lucy Lippard (1939-now), Arlene Raven (1944-2006) and Norma Broude (1941-now) started gathering attention. In the 1980's critics urged the art world to consider the current approach towards non-Western art, along with issues of feminism and the AIDS epidemic.⁹⁵ It can be deduced then, that critics acted as allies or representatives of minorities, in terms of gender and sexual orientation. Matters of identity were brought to the forefront of critical discourse, a concept that, as will be explained in the following chapters, still dominates art critical discussions.

As the interests for the global art market intensified, more critics entered the dialogue, such as philosopher Arthur Danto (1924-2013), Robert Hughes (1938-2012) and Roberta Smith (1948-now).⁹⁶ Finally, during the 1990's, with the opening of the artworld towards a global conversation, art criticism also reflected the plurality of international voices with the recognition of critics born in Asia and Africa.⁹⁷ However, with the multiplication of

⁸⁹ Costello, "Greenberg's Kant and the Fate of Aesthetics," 219-220.

⁹⁰ Houston, *An Introduction to Art Criticism*, 62, 67; Lovatt, "Rosalind Krauss's 'The Originality of the Avant-Garde'," 601.

⁹¹ Houston, *An Introduction to Art Criticism*, 67.

⁹² *Ibid*, 70.

⁹³ Another example of the political turn in criticism of the 1970's are the texts by John Berger and T.J. Clark. *Ibid*, 70-71.

⁹⁴ *Ibid*, 68-69; Mondloch, "The Difference Problem," 19.

⁹⁵ Houston, *An Introduction to Art Criticism*, 73.

⁹⁶ *Ibid*, 74-77.

⁹⁷ Critics from Asia and Africa mentioned by Houston are, among others, Okwui Enwezor, Geeta Kapur, Boris Groys, Gao Minglu, Olu Oguibe and Salah Hassan. *Ibid*, 74-77.

international exhibitions, curators seemingly overtook the role of the critics in artwork evaluation. Many critics then, in order to adapt to the new reality of their sector, started taking part in curatorial projects, or tried to keep the public's attention through their distinctive writing styles.⁹⁸

1.3. Chapter Conclusion

This chapter has followed the evolution of art criticism from the eighteenth century until now, in order to specify the roles of the discipline throughout its history and the merits based on which art was evaluated. The discipline was created during the eighteenth century, as a means of evaluating the artworks' aesthetic aspects.⁹⁹ As the practice of art criticism intensified, mainly around the French Academic Salons, the prominent motives for criticism were social and political. The critics were seen as public educators, spokespeople of national cultural dominance or representatives of the mass in political and cultural discourses. They were tasked with interpreting public opinion or stigmatised for controlling it. The subject matter of paintings was often of interest among critics during the eighteenth and nineteenth century, as conversations around morality or naturalism were recurring. During the nineteenth century, in cases such as Baudelaire, Emile Zola and Henry Cole, art criticism was instrumental for the acceptance of new artistic approaches.¹⁰⁰ By the end of the nineteenth century, the development of ideas around art evaluation based on history or social and political context, created an important shift, which would influence critics well into the twentieth century.

With the arrival of the twentieth century new relations with criticism were formed in regards to art market manipulation and the expression of art's fundamental characteristics.¹⁰¹ The change in the critics' preference from naturalistic to abstract subject matters opened the path for formalist movements in art criticism. The early formalist approaches of Roger Fry and Clive Bell, allowed formerly unrepresented manifestations of art, such as art from other continents, to be included in Western conversations.¹⁰² In the middle of the century those movements matured as Greenberg's formalism did not see abstract artworks only as confined to their medium; he also endeavoured to assign them historical and political context.¹⁰³ As the

⁹⁸ Houston, *An Introduction to Art Criticism*, 76-77.

⁹⁹ Ibid; Wrigley, *The Origins of French Art Criticism*.

¹⁰⁰ Houston, *An Introduction to Art Criticism*; Wrigley, *The Origins of French Art Criticism*; *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, "Sir Henry Cole."

¹⁰¹ Houston, *An Introduction to Art Criticism*.

¹⁰² Ibid, 45-46.

¹⁰³ Greenberg, "Towards a Newer Laocoon."

twentieth century was coming to an end, criticism challenged the awareness of the art world in matters of identity, diversity and feminism, advocating for inclusion and the acknowledgement of a personal relation with art.¹⁰⁴ This opening towards diverse and international approaches in art, combined with the shift in the field from quality control to a more generalised “art writing”, as will be explained in the next chapter, has created uncertainty upon art criticism’s functions in the beginning of the twenty-first century.¹⁰⁵

¹⁰⁴ Houston, *An Introduction to Art Criticism*, 77.

¹⁰⁵ *Ibid*, 77-79.

Chapter 2. The Role of Art Criticism in the Twenty-First Century

This chapter will be focused on examining the current condition of art criticism. It will consist of discussions about the issues the discipline is currently facing, from the point of view of academics, such as James Elkins, curators, such as Miwon Kwon, and critics, such as John McDonald.¹⁰⁶ Moreover, the ‘Superscript 2015 Panel: Credibility, Criticism, Collusion’, organised by the Walker Art Center in 2015 will be analysed, as it was a rare opportunity for active experts in the field, at the time, to express their opinions about the function of art criticism.¹⁰⁷ The conversation is held between Ryan Schreiber, founder of *Pitchfork*, Isaac Fitzgerald, *New York Times* bestselling author and editor for *Buzzfeed Books*, Christopher Knight, art critic for *LA Times* who in 2020 won the Pulitzer Prize for art criticism, and Orit Gat, managing editor of the *Witte de With Review*.¹⁰⁸ As feminism was a significant aspect of *The Milk of Dreams* Venice Biennial in 2022, the chapter will conclude with an account of feminism in relation to art criticism, by feminist art critics and scholars Amelia Jones, Kate Mondloch, Katy Deepwell, to understand the current limitations around feminist art critical practices.¹⁰⁹ The aforementioned discussions will provide valuable insight into the current challenges of professional critics and will aid the identification of further objectives of the field today. This process will allow for the current condition of art criticism to be reviewed in the third chapter, under the light of the criticism around *The Milk of Dreams* Venice Biennial, in an effort to discern whether art critics retain their relevance by referring to the field’s historical functions.

2.1. Discussions Regarding the Crisis of Art Criticism

Regarding the twenty-first century, Houston notices that there is a difficulty in explicitly describing the role of art criticism.¹¹⁰ Since the beginning of the century, art evaluation befell mostly on art institutions and curators. Art critics’ authoritative critical role has diminished in favour of writing informational essays on contemporary art happenings, which drove many

¹⁰⁶ Elkins, “Questionnaire on ‘The Contemporary’,” 10-12; Elkins, “On the Absence of Judgement in Art Criticism”; Kwon, “Questionnaire on ‘The Contemporary’,” 13-15; McDonald, “The Role of the Art Critic.”

¹⁰⁷ Schreiber, Fitzgerald, Knight and Gat, “Superscript 2015 Panel.”

¹⁰⁸ Schreiber, “Bio”; Fitzgerald, “Isaac Fitzgerald”; Iversen, “The Brooklyn 100”; Los Angeles Times, “Christopher Knight”; Gat, “About.”

¹⁰⁹ Jones, “Contemporary Feminism”; Mondloch, “The Difference Problem”; Deepwell, “Art Criticism.”

¹¹⁰ Houston, *An Introduction to Art Criticism*, 77-79.

critics to agree that their profession faces the threat of irrelevance.¹¹¹ This situation has not been resolved until now. Art criticism is still, at least seemingly, facing a crisis at this day and age. The field tries to reinvent itself amidst global artistic practices, and the current plurality of critical writing in existence, not only by professional art critics in academic and journalistic fields but non-institutional critics, such as bloggers and celebrities, as well. This uncertainty regarding art criticism's relevance today becomes more accentuated when attempting to find an adequate definition.

The *Merriam-Webster Dictionary* describes the word criticism as “the art of evaluating or analysing works of art or literature” and the *Cambridge Dictionary* offers the rather broad definition “the act of saying that something or someone is bad or a comment that says what is bad about it”.¹¹² None of the aforementioned definitions however offer insight on whether this practice can be performed in a professional capacity or what is the actual objective of the discipline; They are strictly confined to the act of passing judgement on something. The term art critic is similarly ill-defined. A definition is not available in the *Oxford Dictionary of Art and Artists*, but the *Oxford Dictionary of Journalism* describes the critic as “a journalist who reviews art and/or culture and who may or may not be an expert in their field.”¹¹³ The *Merriam-Webster Dictionary* defines the critic as “one who engages often professionally in the analysis, evaluation, or appreciation of works of art or artistic performances” or “one who expresses a reasoned opinion on any matter especially involving a judgement of its value, truth, righteousness, beauty, or technique.”¹¹⁴ Given that those definitions still suggest general descriptions about what a critic does and do not give any indication of the person's institutional capacity or objectives, for this paper the definition of the *Cambridge Dictionary* can be seen as the most relevant, albeit still not specific enough: “a person whose job is to give an opinion about books, movies, or music and theater performances.”¹¹⁵ Thus, taking all those definitions into consideration, it becomes clear that both in “criticism” and “critic”, which terms could be specified for the goal of this paper as “art criticism” and “art critic”, the most important factor is judgement, while all the additional aspects of the practice remain unclear.

Curator Miwon Kwon mentions in her essay in the ‘Questionnaire on “The Contemporary”’ by Hal Foster et al that good writing of contemporary art history functions as

¹¹¹ Houston, *An Introduction to Art Criticism*, 77-79; Lijster, “Where is the Critic?”

¹¹² *Merriam-Webster Dictionary*, “Criticism”; *Cambridge Dictionary*, “Criticism.”

¹¹³ Harcup, *Oxford Dictionary of Journalism*, “Critic.”

¹¹⁴ *Merriam-Webster Dictionary*, “Critic.”

¹¹⁵ *Cambridge Dictionary*, “Critic.”

art criticism.¹¹⁶ This way she incorporates the critic's job description to that of the art historian's. The curator bases this statement in her belief that art history writing, seeing as it involves the present, should analyse the contemporary factors which render something recognizable as art. Even though her text is not concerned with discerning the functions of art criticism, it offers an indication of what she believes the field is concerned about; identifying the factors based on which something can be considered art. However, examining this remark from another lens, could indicate that the contemporary art historian's task is far more complicated. Historians need to not only acknowledge that something is art now, but also place it within a historical context, a task that, going back to the twentieth century, already interested critics. The dilemma then remains, if determining and contextualising art in the twenty-first century is reserved by art historians, then another distinct objective in the field of art criticism needs to be established in order to justify the critics' activity.

Elkins explains in the 'Questionnaire on "The Contemporary"' that there has been confusion about the function of art criticism due to fundamental issues that the field does not strive to resolve, such as its relation to its history, its purposes, and its influence towards the art market and art institutions.¹¹⁷ In 'On the Absence of Judgement in Art Criticism' in his edited book *The State of Art Criticism*, he also discusses the contradiction which characterises the critical field in the past decades: "it's dying, but it's everywhere".¹¹⁸ For Elkins, although there are many instances where one can read official critical writing, including academia, journalism, and gallery catalogues, it is not clear to which audience those refer to and, moreover, they lack a cohesive critical theory.¹¹⁹ Simultaneously, the absence of a principal theory, which would function as a centre or a restraint to be used by the critics in an inspiring manner, creates yet another conundrum.

Elkins uses the example of Greenberg's and Fried's formalism to explain that a strict critical position does not allow for the practice of open-minded criticism.¹²⁰ Distinctly, Elkins states:

"If you decide your Theory of Everything over coffee before you go to the gallery opening, your review is apt to be atrocious. That kind of theory, or position, ruins the possibility of open-minded encounters with objects."¹²¹

¹¹⁶ Kwon, "Questionnaire on 'The Contemporary'," 13-15.

¹¹⁷ Elkins, "Questionnaire on 'The Contemporary'," 11.

¹¹⁸ Elkins, "On the Absence of Judgement," 72.

¹¹⁹ Ibid, 71, 76-77, 80.

¹²⁰ Ibid, 92-95.

¹²¹ Ibid, 92.

Nevertheless, the opposite stance would not prove constructive either; Elkins deduces from the example of Jerry Saltz's reviews: "if criticism is to go on without positions, it cannot go the way Saltz goes without running into the problem of not having positions."¹²² The historian realises the difficulties art criticism currently encounters. If not having a position is practically impossible and having a distinct position runs the danger of employing anachronistic practices, then a possible reform in art criticism could be very difficult to achieve.¹²³ Therefore, Elkins adds to the already existing uncertainty on the discipline's objectives, yet another roadblock. The aforementioned crisis on art criticism has not evolved only around why critics write, but also how, from which point of view they approach their subjects.

Professor Thijs Lijster also takes part in the conversation with his essay 'Where is the Critic?'.¹²⁴ Based on the theories of Jurgen Habermas, Richard Sennett, William Marx and Rónán McDonald, Professor Lijster offers three reasons why criticism is currently going through a crisis. The first reason is the decline of the public sphere, which was the original incentive for the critics' existence as a servant of the public.¹²⁵ Lijster's remark on the fragmentation of the public sphere however challenges additional objectives of the discipline, as those have been identified earlier in this paper. As the public cannot be accounted as an entity, critics can no longer claim to interpret its opinion, nor educate it in matters of morality, politics or any other subject which in the past was examined in the scope of a single authoritative point of view. Furthermore, critics cannot be deemed responsible in recognising the most prominent tendencies in artistic production, as was the case with Greenberg's formalism in the twentieth century. As the subject of taste has been democratised, it is no longer up to a small portion of art experts to decide what kind of art is successful.

Secondly, Lijster adds, the opinion that the existence of art criticism is equal to the existence of the work of art and not parasitic to it, starting with Romanticism, eventually led to a damaged relationship with the public.¹²⁶ As previously discussed in the case of Hegel, art criticism adds the component of interpretation in artistic production, from which can be deduced that the critic is equal in importance with the artist.¹²⁷ Lijster however, bases his argument on the paradigm of Marx's comments on the decline in literature.¹²⁸ Literature lost

¹²² Elkins, "On the Absence of Judgement," 93.

¹²³ Ibid, 96.

¹²⁴ Lijster, "Where is the Critic?"

¹²⁵ Ibid, 38-39.

¹²⁶ Lijster, "Where is the Critic?" 40-41.

¹²⁷ Harries, "Hegel on the Future of Art," 689.

¹²⁸ Lijster, "Where is the Critic?" 40-41.

its importance in conveying moral and social comments and consequently lost the interest of the public. This event also determined the failure of criticism, which instead of distancing itself from art, persisted in being considered equal to it. Finally, the third reason, according to the professor, is the schism in art criticism between its journalistic and academic aspects.¹²⁹ By becoming academic, art criticism further estranged itself from the public, becoming a specialised tool for intellectuals and losing the political scope it retained during the eighteenth century. Journalist critics, on the other hand, faced another challenge. They were tasked to express their opinions to a public that has either already formed their own or is not interested anymore, due to the democratisation of taste, as established above.

It is understandable from Lijster's observations, that the lack of clarity regarding the role of art criticism, which, as he explained, started in Romanticism, has been intensified in the past two decades.¹³⁰ The influence held by non-institutional critics, such as celebrities, or bloggers and influencers, seems to challenge the value of professionals even further.¹³¹ The professional critics, unavoidably, become victims of the generalisation that online popular culture is associated with low standards in art writing. For Lijster though, the fact that high quality criticism can be produced even regarding aspects of what is considered "low" culture, is not in question. Still, whether the critic's opinion can be deemed more legitimate than the opinion of a person who lacks the experience of recognizing aesthetic quality, is not clear. To express the pitfall behind this uncertainty, he refers to art critic John McDonald. The critic argues that the plurality of opinions on the internet allows the readers to pay attention only to voices which confirm their own thoughts. The audience essentially cancels the democratic and authoritative role of criticism, as it tends to consider only the opinions with which it already agrees. Lijster is led to the conclusion that the role of the contemporary critic is to reintroduce the importance of aesthetic experience to the public.¹³² Therefore, he recognizes that the field still holds a distinct role as a profession in the art world. From this conclusion, it also derives that Lijster diminishes the importance of non-institutional critique in favour of professional critics.

However, the discussion continues among critics about other important insights the discipline has the ability to offer. John McDonald in an essay for *Raven Contemporary* was disturbed regarding the results of a poll where a number of art critics were asked about their

¹²⁹ Lijster, "Where is the Critic?" 41-43.

¹³⁰ Ibid, 38-43.

¹³¹ Ibid, 43-45.

¹³² Ibid, 53.

occupation.¹³³ Their responsibility to have an opinion, which as has been already established is a defining factor in the critical practice, was of the lowest interest, while many critics prioritised providing information about art exhibitions instead of honest reviews.¹³⁴

McDonald comments on that fact, by expressing the need for criticism to focus on commenting on the value of an exhibition, instead of simply generating extra publicity and repeating information.¹³⁵ For McDonald, criticism should be a difficult process that provides honest feedback and stands up to the current tendency of forced praise within the art world. He mentions though, that this tactic might not have tangible results, since the value of art is currently more influenced by the art market, than critical writing.

2.2. Analysis of the ‘Superscript 2015 Panel: Credibility, Criticism, Collusion’

In 2015 the Walker Art Center hosted a three day symposium on the subject of art criticism in a digital age.¹³⁶ In light of the conference, a panel was held between critics from different artistic fields; Ryan Schreiber for music, Isaac Fitzgerald for literature, Christopher Knight and Orit Gat for fine art.¹³⁷ Taking into consideration that almost a decade has passed since the panel was assembled, it is worth examining it in this paper as it still provides relevant insights on the functions of art criticism in the digital age from active and successful critics in their perspective fields. The experts had the opportunity to discuss the issues of credibility and diversity in art criticism, as well as the difference between critical analysis and journalism in the art sector.¹³⁸ Christopher Knight opened up the discourse by denying the statement that art criticism is in crisis.¹³⁹ He then continued by acknowledging that digital platforms offer more opportunities for casual conversations in a public spectrum.¹⁴⁰ This occurrence created a lot of confusion amongst the profession. Even though Knight did not specifically elaborate on that statement, it can be assumed that he refers to the fact that critics until the digital age were used to expressing their views without getting immediate feedback from their readers. Isaac Fitzgerald chooses to focus on the positive outlook of this shift,

¹³³ McDonald, “The Role of the Art Critic.”

¹³⁴ *Merriam-Webster Dictionary*, “Criticism”; *Ibid*, “Critic”; *Cambridge Dictionary*, “Criticism”; *Ibid*, “Critic”; Harcup, *Oxford Dictionary of Journalism*, “Critic”; McDonald, “The Role of the Art Critic.”

¹³⁵ McDonald, “The Role of the Art Critic.”

¹³⁶ Schreiber, Fitzgerald, Knight and Gat, “Superscript 2015 Panel.”

¹³⁷ *Ibid*; Orit Gat, “About.”

¹³⁸ Schreiber, Fitzgerald, Knight and Gat, “Superscript 2015 Panel.”

¹³⁹ Knight, “Superscript 2015 Panel,” 00:41- 01:00.

¹⁴⁰ *Ibid*, 01:15- 02:02.

which he believes to be the representation of diverse voices and backgrounds.¹⁴¹ On the matter of the death of the critic Orit Gat also adds that she believes criticism is still very important.¹⁴² She views herself as equal to the artists, to which Knight cleverly replies that “if there were no artists, I could write endlessly about why not”.¹⁴³

Regarding credibility and the need to express honest opinions, the experts have different views.¹⁴⁴ Fitzgerald, and sometimes Knight in order to protect an upcoming artist, avoid writing about art they do not like. The other two, consider it their responsibility to always protect their readers from what they consider bad art. Nevertheless, they all agreed that dependability of the critic and institutional weight constitute decisive factors of authority. Additionally, they note that authority might prove more difficult to attain by writing solely good reviews.¹⁴⁵ Negative criticism expresses selectiveness, which in the end enforces the positive comments. Even the action of writing about a certain artwork though, a choice based on personal taste, reveals something about the artwork’s importance.¹⁴⁶ Knight stated later that “the fundamental thing that the writer has to do in addressing a work of art, is to take it seriously”, further enforcing the idea that even negative criticism comes from a place of care and respect about artistic production.¹⁴⁷

Unfortunately, as he realised, art publications with advertisements about art, often try to censor the critics, when their opinions do not agree with the image they want to promote.¹⁴⁸ Knight offered the example of an assignment by *Art Forum*, where Rosalind Krauss and he were commissioned to write reviews on a Jasper Johns exhibition by the Museum of Modern Art. The magazine would not accept Knight’s proposed opening line “I don’t like not liking Jasper Johns’ recent work”, so they sent him back a rewritten, more positive, review.¹⁴⁹ The critic had to fight to keep his right to express his opinion, which made him realise that he preferred to work for media which do not attempt to censor him.¹⁵⁰ This recounting of Knight’s personal experience reveals that even though he takes it as a responsibility in his critical capacity to express an opinion, he realises that it is not always possible. The critics then have to be selective regarding the assignments they accept today.

¹⁴¹ Fitzgerald, “Superscript 2015 Panel,” 02:04- 03:54.

¹⁴² Gat, “Superscript 2015 Panel,” 04:33- 05:23.

¹⁴³ Knight and Gat, “Superscript 2015 Panel,” 04:33- 05:34, transcribed by the author.

¹⁴⁴ Schreiber, Fitzgerald, Knight and Gat, “Superscript 2015 Panel,” 8.58-17:18.

¹⁴⁵ *Ibid*, 22:20-27:17.

¹⁴⁶ Gat, “Superscript 2015 Panel,” 36:00- 36:37.

¹⁴⁷ Knight, “Superscript 2015 Panel,” 57:10-57:32, transcribed by the author.

¹⁴⁸ Schreiber, Fitzgerald, Knight and Gat, “Superscript 2015 Panel,” 33:04-39:59.

¹⁴⁹ Knight, “Superscript 2015 Panel,” 33:53-33:50, transcribed by the author.

¹⁵⁰ Schreiber, Fitzgerald, Knight and Gat, “Superscript 2015 Panel,” 33:50-39:59.

Freedom of opinion is not always a given, as other factors, often financial, are at play when the publications decide which review is allowed to circulate.

Knight also explains the difference between journalism and criticism. He states: “My byline says critic, so the reader is clued in that what you’re about to read is an opinion. And if that’s not on the byline, what you’re about to read is ‘theoretically’ fact.”¹⁵¹ In terms of criticising institutions, the panel agrees that change happens through criticism.¹⁵² Specifically, Orit Gat asserts that “I think museums... should have like critical groups coming in to discuss. . . what they do as an institution.”¹⁵³ In an overview of the panel, the four experts offer different ways to appreciate the function of art criticism.¹⁵⁴ A critic can introduce new art in the grand spectrum of its history, write about artworks which their readers have the opportunity to experience first-hand, and keep the market in check. Most importantly however, all four critics express a feeling of obligation towards their readers. They understand that in order to practise criticism ethically, they need to be as objective as possible and to not avoid taking on the difficult task of holding institutions accountable. Interestingly, as active professional critics, they never come to an impasse in regard to whether criticism is relevant or useful. The field’s significance is taken as a given, although they do not directly identify the reasons why.

2.3. Art Criticism and Feminism in the Twenty-First Century

Among the various discussions about the function and goals art criticism should currently have, there is also discourse on its involvement with feminist theories. As established earlier in this paper however, art criticism in relation to identity and gender did not flourish until the seventies, along with the second wave of feminism.¹⁵⁵ Taking that time as a starting point for early feminist criticism, it is important to see where the field stands now and what advancements have been made. This process will facilitate the understanding of a part of the objectives and characteristics of art criticism around *The Milk of Dreams* Venice Biennial in the following chapter.

According to feminist art historian and critic Amelia Jones, the most noteworthy contemplations around feminism are done through art, as they bring forth the most important

¹⁵¹ Knight, “Superscript 2015 Panel,” 45:10-45:28, transcribed by the author.

¹⁵² Schreiber, Fitzgerald, Knight and Gat, “Superscript 2015 Panel,” 1:06:14-01:09:07.

¹⁵³ Gat, “Superscript 2015 Panel,” 1:07:15-01:07:30.

¹⁵⁴ Schreiber, Fitzgerald, Knight and Gat, “Superscript 2015 Panel,” 8:58-14:32.

¹⁵⁵ Houston, *An Introduction to Art Criticism*, 68-69. Mondloch, “The Difference Problem,” 19.

ideas of the movement with visual cues.¹⁵⁶ She brings as an example the practices of Amy Adler, Renee Cox, Mona Hatoum and Mira Shor. Jones explains however that, although there is an abundance of great feminist art, critics and historians often fail to comprehend the artworks' intellectual and aesthetic components.¹⁵⁷ She attributes this inadequacy to the admission that now that time has passed since the earlier feminist movements, feminist theorists need to approach the subject from another lens. Jones explains that what was considered a product of original thought in the 1970s, does not hold the same urgency anymore. She considers it important to examine the ways in which feminism is either incorporated or still marginalised in institutions. Nevertheless, she makes an appeal for "an expanded humility", meaning an effort to understand how feminism intertwines with contemporary issues related to capitalism, gender, race, and class.¹⁵⁸

Assistant Professor of Art History Kate Mondloch argues that the constant duality between 1970s essentialist and 1980s theoretical feminism under which the movement is constantly re-examined, does not allow the understanding of feminism as an interdisciplinary and diverse movement.¹⁵⁹ In more detail, she believes that the misconception around the two terms being antagonistic, which was accentuated in the 1990s, has been amplified with the passing of time. This premise created a problem for critics and academics in general, who were no longer able to conceive how art relating to feminism could belong to more than one straightforward category.¹⁶⁰ What Mondloch recognises instead, is that the two movements were, and still are, simultaneous and intersecting. She supports this statement with the example of the 1970s, when, while in England feminist discourse around art was focusing on female representation, in the United States the conversation turned more around gender equality.¹⁶¹

Feminist art critic, Katy Deepwell, offers her input in regards to the nature of feminist art criticism in the twenty-first century, in her essay 'Art Criticism and the State of Feminist Art Criticism'.¹⁶² She mentions that the publications, exhibitions and artist initiatives exploring feminist issues have increased significantly on a global level since 2000.¹⁶³ However, Deepwell questions the limited number of quotations of women art critics in

¹⁵⁶ Jones, "Contemporary Feminism," 17.

¹⁵⁷ Ibid, 18.

¹⁵⁸ Ibid, 18.

¹⁵⁹ Mondloch, "The Difference Problem," 19, 24.

¹⁶⁰ Ibid, 26.

¹⁶¹ Ibid, 27.

¹⁶² Deepwell, "Art Criticism."

¹⁶³ Ibid, 2, 4, 8.

published articles and the small number of publications or exhibited artworks by female critics and artists. Moreover, she highlights the difference that the inclusion of the female point of view could make in matters of enriching the current rhetoric and art production. No matter the amount of feminist literature, Deepwell believes that women critics, not unlike what happens in most academic fields, tend to be ignored, with only two articles being repeatedly mentioned, Linda Nochlin's 'Why Have There Been no Great Women Artists' (1971) and Laura Mulvey's 'Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema' (1975) amidst the current international writing production.¹⁶⁴

Since the 1970s, Deepwell explains, feminist critics have been the only ones frequently focusing on women's work, with male critics referencing the same established names.¹⁶⁵ Male art critics only pay attention to female artists, when they consider them to be the extraordinary exception. It is noteworthy at this point that Deepwell does not provide any examples, either for what she or her peers consider extraordinary women artists, nor for frequently mentioned male artists. As a result however, even though women's inclusion in exhibitions has progressively increased, it is not reflected in the number of critical writings focused on female art initiatives, such as exhibitions by female curators or with predominantly female works. This tendency assigns an additional obligation to feminist writers. As Deepwell suggests, feminist writers have to correct and counter-argue for the female existence in the sector.¹⁶⁶

2.4. Chapter Conclusion

This chapter focused on determining the current condition of art criticism. In the twenty-first century academics and critics are concerned about the relevance of the discipline, because, as they have explained, not only it lacks coherence, but it is also challenged by the existence of non-institutional critique due to the globalisation and the arrival of the digital age.¹⁶⁷ Having examined, however, the diversity of the field's practices in the past, inconsistency is not a new phenomenon. There have been several points in time when diverse critical approaches coexisted. An example can be taken as early as the eighteenth century.¹⁶⁸ Critics in France

¹⁶⁴ Deepwell, "Art Criticism," 8; Nochlin, "Why Have There Been No Great Women Artists?"; Mulvey "Visual Pleasure."

¹⁶⁵ Deepwell, "Art Criticism," 4-5.

¹⁶⁶ Ibid, 4-5.

¹⁶⁷ Elkins, "Questionnaire on 'The Contemporary'"; Elkins, "On the Absence of Judgement"; Lijster, "Where is the Critic?"; Houston, *An Introduction to Art Criticism*.

¹⁶⁸ Houston, *An Introduction to Art Criticism*; Haskell, *History and its Images*, 218-220.

were focused on the artworks presented on the Salons; they commented on their subjects and tried to instil their political and social views in order to subtly challenge the monarchy. At the same time Winckelmann in Germany already remarked on the connections of good art with its historical circumstances. Even though the social and political elements in both cases are prominent, the French saw art and the practice of criticism as an opportunity to express their views, whereas Winkelmann saw art primarily as the result of such elements.

Even though professor Lijster sees the digital sphere reluctantly, he takes it out of the equation by assigning only to professional critics the objective of re-introducing the value of aesthetics to the public.¹⁶⁹ The critics of the panel mostly consider digitalisation a positive development.¹⁷⁰ The fact that their texts are available on the internet allows them to have direct conversations with their readers and brings forth more diverse opinions. They do not feel challenged by non-institutional critics as they recognise the authority their professional capacity validates. While non-institutional criticism does not seem to be an unsurpassable obstacle, feminist criticism still seems to be struggling. Given the comments of Jones, Mondloch, and Deepwell on the discomfort of contemporary critics in touching upon feminist issues, it is no surprise that Houston in his historical retrospection avoided delving into details about feminist discourse in the 1970s and mostly recited the events around it.¹⁷¹ Specifically in regards to Deepwell, it is also not curious that most sources around feminist criticism are written by women, quoting other women, a situation which will be further established in the next chapter.

¹⁶⁹ Lijster, "Where is the Critic?"

¹⁷⁰ Schreiber, Fitzgerald, Knight and Gat, "Superscript 2015 Panel."

¹⁷¹ Houston, *An Introduction to Art Criticism*, 68-69; Jones, "Contemporary Feminism"; Mondloch, "The Difference Problem"; Deepwell, "Art Criticism."

Chapter 3. Case Study of The 59th Venice Biennial

This chapter will focus on the case study of the 59th Venice Biennial.¹⁷² Being one of the most prominent exhibitions in the artworld today, this event is deemed to gather the attention of established professionals in the field of art criticism, because it has the ability to set the tone regarding what is currently expected from contemporary artists by the art world. Thus, in this study, the Venice Biennial provides the opportunity to examine the most relevant conversations around art, initiated by the most prominent media in the field. The first section of this chapter will include an analysis of the themes of *The Milk of Dreams*, as well as Cecilia Alemani's curatorial approach. This endeavour will contribute to a better understanding of the exhibition's concept and the way that was brought into fruition. In the second part of the chapter, a sample of five online professional reviews will be analysed, to determine what was the critics' focus in correspondence to Alemani's intentions and to highlight contemporary roles of art criticism in relation to the discipline's history.¹⁷³

Considering the recognition of the Venice Biennial as an international art event, there were numerous reviews available about *The Milk of Dreams* exhibition. The most prominent examples of reviews which were not included in this thesis are 'The Collective Feminist Agency of *The Milk of Dreams*' by Vanessa Peterson for *Frieze Magazine*, 'Looking Inward, and Back, at a Biennale for the History Books' by Jason Farago for the *New York Times*, and 'The Milk of Dreams: 59th Venice Biennale' by Alka Pande for *Take on Art* magazine.¹⁷⁴ However, for the purpose of this study, a limited sample of reviews has been selected to ensure the presentation of varying critical arguments and points of view. The selected writers' perception regarding their role as professional critics also played a role in the selection process. Each included review suggests a different understanding of the functions of contemporary art criticism, as will be proven in this chapter.

The reviews have been selected based on the reputations of their mediums of publication, the critics' backgrounds and achievements in the field, and the difference in each of the art critics' approach.¹⁷⁵ Chris Clarke is a senior curator at The Glucksman, University of Cork, Ireland and has written several reviews for established art magazines such as *Art*

¹⁷² La Biennale di Venezia, "59th International Art Exhibition"; La Biennale di Venezia, "The Organization."

¹⁷³ Clarke, "59th Venice Biennale"; Davis, "The 2022 Venice Biennale"; Rappolt, "59th Venice Biennale Review"; Baravalle, "*The Milk of Dreams*"; D'Mello, "The 59th Venice Art Biennale."

¹⁷⁴ Peterson, "The Collective Feminist Agency"; Farago, "Looking Inward, and Back"; Pande, "*The Milk of Dreams*."

¹⁷⁵ Clarke, "59th Venice Biennale"; Davis, "The 2022 Venice Biennale"; Rappolt, "59th Venice Biennale Review"; Baravalle, "*The Milk of Dreams*"; D'Mello, "The 59th Venice Art Biennale."

Monthly and Culture.¹⁷⁶ Ben Davis has been the National Art Critic for *Art News* since 2016 and was recognised as one of the five most influential art critics in the United States by the Nieman Journalism Lab in 2019.¹⁷⁷ Mark Rappolt is the editor-in-chief of *Art Review*, one of the most acknowledged international art publications.¹⁷⁸ Rosalyn D’Mello is a feminist curator and writer.¹⁷⁹ In 2019 she was awarded the India Foundation of the Arts research grant, and in 2020 she was an evaluator for the Andy Warhol Foundation Art Writers Grant. Marco Baravalle is a curator and activist who focuses on the connection between art, ecology and activism.¹⁸⁰ Moreover, he is a professor of Phenomenology of Contemporary Art at the Master’s in Visual Arts and Curatorial Studies of Nuova Accademia di Belle Arti in Milan.

This analysis of the selected reviews will offer the opportunity of understanding what each critic’s perspective reveals regarding their role, and will provide further insight on the merits on which art is being assessed now.¹⁸¹ It will also allow for the examination of contemporary critics’ connection to the discipline’s history, which is the main question of this thesis. Even though non-institutional criticism appeared to be an obstacle for today’s professional critics based on Lijster’s statements, non-institutional reviews were not included in this study.¹⁸² The reason behind this exclusion lies mostly to the fact that the results of the ‘Superscript 2015 Panel’, and Lijster’s essay, as established in the previous chapter, have already proposed a different way of apprehending the professional critics’ role and significance in relation to the digital age.¹⁸³ Moreover, the importance of the Venice Biennial in supporting the production of contemporary art, unavoidably, results to a more restricted audience comprised by art professionals, artists, curators and critics.¹⁸⁴ Thus, a vast selection of non-institutional reviews was not available in this case, as amateur art enthusiasts are not the target audience of this event.

¹⁷⁶ Clarke, “About.”

¹⁷⁷ Davis, “About.”

¹⁷⁸ Observer, “Mark Rappolt.”

¹⁷⁹ D’Mello, “Biography.”

¹⁸⁰ Baravalle, “Bio.”

¹⁸¹ Clarke, “59th Venice Biennale”; Davis, “The 2022 Venice Biennale”; Rappolt, “59th Venice Biennale Review”; Baravalle, “*The Milk of Dreams*”; D’Mello, “The 59th Venice Art Biennale.”

¹⁸² Lijster, “Where is the Critic?”

¹⁸³ Ibid.; Schreiber, Fitzgerald, Knight and Gat, “Superscript 2015 Panel.”

¹⁸⁴ La Biennale di Venezia, “The Organization.”

3.1. *The Milk of Dreams*

The Venice Biennial, which was founded in 1893, is currently one of the most prominent art events worldwide, whose main aim is to converse with international art trends and promote the research in art, architecture, cinema, dance, music, and theatre.¹⁸⁵ It gives the opportunity to art professionals, such as artists and curators, to come together and offer to the art public a pluralism of artistic approaches. The year 2022 saw the return of the Biennale Arte after the Covid-19 Pandemic, with *The Milk of Dreams* International Exhibition, curated by Cecilia Alemani.¹⁸⁶ The exhibition included 213 artists, most of them women, and was accompanied by eighty national participations and thirty events. The art exhibition's return was very successful, as it reached the highest attendance in the history of the institution with 800.000 visitors.

Alemaní is the first Italian woman to hold the position of curator in the Venice Biennial's International Exhibition and, as such, it is no surprise that she selected to bring to the spotlight the often misrepresented women artists.¹⁸⁷ This was not only evident in her artist selection, but also in the exhibition's title, *The Milk of Dreams*, which was inspired by surrealist artist, Leonora Carrington's book.¹⁸⁸ The book, as Alemani explained, describes "a magical world where life is constantly re-envisioned through the prism of the imagination".¹⁸⁹ It is a children's book, comprised by the drawings of Carrington's kids on the walls of their house in Mexico.¹⁹⁰ Gender representation however, was not the only issue that concerned 2022's version of the Venice Biennial.¹⁹¹ Keeping in line with the organisation's goal of being at the forefront of artistic developments, 180 out of the 213 artists Alemani included, had never participated before in the International Exhibition. Moreover, five new countries took part in the national exhibitions, those of the Republic of Cameroon, Namibia, Nepal, Sultanate of Oman, and Uganda, enforcing the global identity of the endeavour.

Alemaní's statement explains in detail the dominant themes of the International Exhibition.¹⁹² She chose to name her endeavour after Carrington's book, as she was interested

¹⁸⁵ La Biennale di Venezia, "The Organization."

¹⁸⁶ La Biennale di Venezia, "The Recent Years."

¹⁸⁷ La Biennale di Venezia, "Biennale Arte 2022"; Cecilia Alemani, "Statement."

¹⁸⁸ Alemani, "Statement"; Carrington, *The Milk of Dreams*.

¹⁸⁹ Alemani, "Statement."

¹⁹⁰ La Biennale di Venezia, "Leonora Carrington."

¹⁹¹ La Biennale di Venezia, "59th International Art Exhibition."

¹⁹² Alemani, "Statement."

in the element of transformation it conveys. The artist's struggle during a mentally unstable period of her life, alongside with her prevailing image as a force of artistic creativity, highlight the world's potential for change with infinite possible outcomes. Without disregarding the influence of Covid-19 and the way people's lives became necessarily entangled with technology, Alemani also included artworks exploring hybrid states between human and artificial bodies. However, Alemani clearly states that her intention was not to bring together a show about Covid-19. The pandemic only created her intention to consider concerns, which sparked during that period, about the survival of humans and the planet. She tried to envision a world without humans to question the responsibilities of each person towards other people, animals, and nature.¹⁹³

Alemaní selected mostly non-white, non-male artists, in confrontation of a dominantly male western canon of art which for a long time has been regarded universal.¹⁹⁴ She attempted to help the viewer come to terms with the contemporary threats of technology, environmental change and sickness. The exhibition included five smaller set-ups at the Central Pavilion and the Arsenale spaces, which the curator named time capsules, because they revealed a different historical approach based on ideas of coexistence instead of rivalry.¹⁹⁵ Those time capsules also commented on institutional approaches of the previous centuries when many great female artists were disregarded and left out of the art historical narrative.

In order to retain a connection to the past and celebrate important female artists, Alemani chose to showcase her selected contemporary artists, alongside artists from the nineteenth and twentieth century, such as Eileen Agar, Leonora Carrington, Claude Cahun, Leonor Fini and Remedios Varo, among others.¹⁹⁶ Alemani saw those artists as representatives of historical artistic movements of the twentieth century, such as surrealism. Even though not specifically mentioned in Alemani's statement, the vast amount of selected female artists as well as the exhibition accompanying texts, composed by writers such as Donna Haraway, Rosi Braidotti, Silvia Federici, and Jennifer Higgie, who are focused on discussions around female identity, reveal the underlying theme of feminism throughout the exhibition.¹⁹⁷ Still, when specifically asked whether this show is feminist, Alemani indicated that she did not want to name it as such, because of the exhibition's diversity in included

¹⁹³ Papini and Alemani, *59th International Art Exhibition Catalogue*, 25; Alemani, "Statement."

¹⁹⁴ Alemani, "Statement"; Papini and Alemani, *59th International Art Exhibition Catalogue*, 26.

¹⁹⁵ La Biennale di Venezia, "Historical Capsules"; Alemani, "Statement."

¹⁹⁶ Alemani, "Statement."

¹⁹⁷ Papini and Alemani, *59th International Art Exhibition Catalogue*, 162, 215, 320, 422.

artists; some label themselves as feminists or ecofeminists, while others do not want to be considered as representatives of the whole female gender.¹⁹⁸

Many of the selected artists, such as Laura Grisi (Figure 6) and Grazia Varisco (Figure 7), Alemanni stated, create conversations about the human body and technology, through the engagement with movements such as kinetic abstraction.¹⁹⁹ The function of language as a means for independence was also commented upon, with references to automatic writing and other forms of communication, as expressed by the work of Georgiana Houghton (Figure 8), among others.²⁰⁰ Non-European ancient traditions along with cultural elements from indigenous populations in Central America were introduced through artworks involved with mythology and religion, which often coincide with contemporary ecological resolutions; such is the work of Sheroanawe Hakihiwe (Figure 9).²⁰¹ The exhibition concluded with the anatomy of the cyborg, hinting towards a post-humanist future, where even gender theories are no longer relevant.²⁰² In the end, as Alemanni explained, this collection of diverse artworks came together to remind people of what they have missed during the pandemic, such as travelling, making new acquaintances, connecting with old friends and enjoying the diversity that life and art can offer.²⁰³

3.2. Reviews

The meticulously selected theme and artworks by Cecilia Alemanni, as well as the importance of the return of the Biennale Arte are particularly relevant in terms of content and approach from an international art exhibition today, as they include references to current issues, such as ecology, feminism, and the technological developments that influence people's lives. However, each critic focused on different aspects of the exhibition. In order to understand the contemporary functions of art criticism and how those relate to the field's history, five reviews will be analysed below.²⁰⁴ Those, as previously mentioned, have been specifically chosen from the wide selection available, either due to the importance of their mediums of

¹⁹⁸ Papini and Alemanni, *59th International Art Exhibition Catalogue*, 33.

¹⁹⁹ *Ibid*, 34.

²⁰⁰ *Ibid*, 32; Alemanni, "Statement."

²⁰¹ Papini and Alemanni, *59th International Art Exhibition Catalogue*, 30; Alemanni, "Statement."

²⁰² Papini and Alemanni, *59th International Art Exhibition Catalogue*, 34-35.

²⁰³ *Ibid*, 25; Alemanni, "Statement."

²⁰⁴ Clarke, "59th Venice Biennale"; Davis, "The 2022 Venice Biennale"; Rappolt, "59th Venice Biennale Review"; Baravalle, "The Milk of Dreams"; D'Mello, "The 59th Venice Art Biennale."

publication, their writers' achievements in the field, or because the critics express significant remarks in relation to the exhibition's context.

3.2.1. Chris Clarke for *Art Monthly*

Art critic and senior curator at the Glucksman, Chris Clarke, wrote for *Art Monthly* that the exhibition gave him the impression of revealing a parallel timeline.²⁰⁵ He starts his review by mentioning the difficult period of the Covid-19 quarantine and presents *The Milk of Dreams* as a much-needed liberating resolution to the audience's oppression, due to social distancing and house confinement. He then comments on Simone Leigh's bronze sculpture *Brick House* from 2019 (Figure 10). The artwork seems to make him think about what "we", incorporating his readers into this question, have been missing, what we are allowed to access and what is out of our reach.²⁰⁶ Focusing on the *Witch's Cradle*, he refers to *Objet* (Figure 11), a famous work by Meret Oppenheim, who he feels is being represented in this section. Clarke continues with a very detailed visual analysis of his exhibition exploration, which includes the environment's smell and the visitors' reactions. Finally, he expresses his agreement with Alemanni's intentions of a female and queer surrealist narrative.

Clarke's byline mentions in which museum he is a senior curator, the Glucksman.²⁰⁷ He does not offer further details however, about his occupation as a critic, giving the impression that his post as a senior curator holds more authority than his criticism, or that his authority as a critic is derived from his authority as a senior curator. His article presents in a very intriguing way the attributes of specific artworks. Clarke keeps the reader engaged, and offers a close-up encounter of the exhibition. This is not the only way the critic manages to include his readers in the overall experience. In the first paragraph, the use of the first person in plural, creates the impression of a collective awareness, which the critic is tasked to express on behalf of his readers; a function of criticism which had already been established by critics of the eighteenth century.²⁰⁸

Clarke's conclusion, along with the overall text, does not challenge further the discourse already created by the Biennial.²⁰⁹ It would be possible for someone to receive similar information through the material and the separate artist texts in the institution's

²⁰⁵ Clarke, "59th Venice Biennale."

²⁰⁶ Ibid.

²⁰⁷ Ibid.

²⁰⁸ Ibid.; Houston, *An Introduction to Art Criticism*; Wrigley, *The Origins of French Art Criticism*.

²⁰⁹ Clarke, "59th Venice Biennale."

website or the event's catalogue. A review which lacks judgement is representative of what McDonald was concerned about, and is directly antagonistic to what has been defined as critical practice, as discussed in the previous chapter.²¹⁰ It mostly functions as a reiteration of the exhibition's informational material, such as *The Milk of Dreams*' official catalogue or Cecilia Alemani's statement.²¹¹ The role of the writer in this case shifts from providing honest criticism to producing additional publicity, which can be confirmed by Clarke's recommendation of the exhibition to his audience.²¹² Clarke's review cannot be completely disregarded however, as his objective is in accordance with the results of the 'Superscript 2015 Panel'. During their discussion, the experts identified as one of their primary tasks the introduction of interesting new work or a new exhibition to their readers.²¹³ This review is only relevant however, if the reader has not yet visited the exhibition in person, nor gone through the informational and advertising material. Clarke does not base his interest in personal insights, but rather rephrases what has already been stated by Alemani and her team.²¹⁴

3.2.2. Ben Davis for *Artnet*

The review by Ben Davis, *Artnet*'s international art critic, focuses as much on the overall feeling of the Biennial, as well as the individual artworks.²¹⁵ The critic starts with a comparison with the previous Biennial of 2019 and a retrospective of the years of the pandemic. He continues with offering feedback on several artworks and the time capsules. More specifically, he combines the artwork related information, such as Cosima von Bonin's sculpture installation (Figure 12) on the roof of the Central Pavilion, with comments about the impression they made to him: "It's as if the show is asking its viewer to look up from our present situation, into imagination."²¹⁶ Thus, Davis is not only interested in the aesthetic aspects of artworks, but also the feelings those bring forth in relation to their context.

Even though he seems to understand Alemani's intentions, he is simultaneously critical of them. Distinctly, he mentions:

²¹⁰ McDonald, "The Role of the Art Critic"; *Merriam-Webster Dictionary*, "Criticism"; *Ibid*, "Critic"; *Cambridge Dictionary*, "Criticism"; *Ibid*, "Critic"; Harcup, *Oxford Dictionary of Journalism*, "Critic."

²¹¹ Hansen, *59th International Art Exhibition Catalogue*; Alemani, "Statement."

²¹² Clarke, "59th Venice Biennale".

²¹³ Schreiber, Fitzgerald, Knight and Gat, "Superscript 2015 Panel."

²¹⁴ Clarke, "59th Venice Biennale"; Alemani, "Statement."

²¹⁵ Davis, "The 2022 Venice Biennale."

²¹⁶ *Ibid*.

“I think it’s fair to raise questions. Debating the stakes of a ‘post-human aesthetics’ will surely be part of the legacy of this Biennale.

But asking for a mission or a program is itself a very instrumental way to think about an art show. And for my money, what is great about this show’s framework is its aesthetic richness, not its philosophical rightness.”²¹⁷

This remark, as Davis hints, is a comment on Alemani’s tendency to attribute such a significance to the works’ contextual qualities, that in the end she almost neglected to appreciate art for the sake of art.²¹⁸ This opinion is further enforced during Davis’s examination of individual artworks. He always discusses their aesthetic aspects, indicating that the curator did not need to focus so much in the exhibition’s theoretical framework. For Zheng Bo’s work, *Le Sacre du Printemps* (Figure 13), for example, he admires the landscape and Bo’s idea to shoot some of the video upside-down. However tasteful though, the artwork makes him challenge the premise that a sexual approach to ecological issues is what the world currently needs. He feels that Zheng Bo’s approach suggests that humans have submitted to the idea that their actions cannot result in changing the world and instead people’s only coping mechanism is magical thinking. Those observations on the artwork’s philosophical approach, reveal that, even though Davis finds Alemani’s effort to contextualise the works excessive, he is not satisfied by the result.

Indeed, even though he states in several ways that *The Milk of Dreams* is a good, coherent show that had a satisfying rhythm, he also mentions that in some instances, which he does not specify, he felt conceptually lost.²¹⁹ He explains this confusion by also commenting on how the offered theoretical background, in the catalogue, the exhibition walls, and even the shop, supports the exhibition’s concept. Davis acknowledges the heavy influence of Donna Haraway’s ‘Cyborg’ and *Companion Species Manifestoes*, as well as Alemani’s statement on the influence of Rosi Braidotti’s ‘Posthuman Critical Theory’.²²⁰ However, he is not fully convinced of the exhibition’s conceptual originality or the urgent need for environmental action proposed by Andreas Malm’s *How to Blow Up a Pipeline*, in the shop.²²¹ From his text, it can be perceived that evaluating the exhibition’s philosophical

²¹⁷ Davis, “The 2022 Venice Biennale.”

²¹⁸ Ibid.

²¹⁹ Ibid.

²²⁰ Haraway, ‘A Manifesto for Cyborgs’; Haraway, *The Companion Species Manifesto*; Braidotti, ‘Posthuman Critical Theory.’

²²¹ Davis, “The 2022 Venice Biennale”; Malm, *How to Blow Up a Pipeline*.

and aesthetic aspects is equally important to Davis.²²² It is worth mentioning however that he devoted more writing space to his aesthetically positive experience, than his disappointment on the exhibition's conceptual background.

3.2.3. Mark Rappolt for *Art Review*

Editor-in-Chief Mark Rappolt's review starts with a seemingly negative remark: "There's a nagging sense that Cecilia Alemani's exhibition *The Milk of Dreams* might just vanish in a puff of smoke".²²³ From the beginning, he states that he has been negative about previous Biennials, or other kinds of international exhibitions. He describes them as "the artistic director's aesthetic vomitorium".²²⁴ However harsh this remark might be, it is a rhetorical trick which does not fail to immediately attract his readers' interest to dig deeper into the article. Reading further, he reveals that his main issue of contempt towards pre-lockdown international exhibitions was their lack of consistency in terms of context. The amount of superficially related artworks on view, ultimately resulted in a stressful experience, especially in cases when he did not have the time for multiple visits. However, at the point where he is in danger of presenting himself as a generally unsatisfied exhibition visitor, Rappolt changes his attitude completely by characterising *The Milk of Dreams* as a revelation.

Rappolt continues his praises, by reciting all the reasons that drove him into this conclusion, such as the seductive artworks he was previously unfamiliar with, the way the exhibition subtly guided the visitors' trajectory and the audience's need to discuss their thoughts and experience.²²⁵ He enters the visual analysis section of his review with a sense of obligation, stating "let's get it out of the way".²²⁶ While he focuses on specific artworks, he makes a point to examine the exhibition's consistency, which he had originally established as an important factor to his previously negative experiences. This consistency for him, in the case of *The Milk of Dreams*, lies in the echoes of neglected differences between the younger artists and their historical predecessors. Moreover, Rappolt recognizes that the exhibition's title also has a similar function. It offers the audience the possibility to experience those

²²² Davis, "The 2022 Venice Biennale."

²²³ Rappolt, "59th Venice Biennale Review."

²²⁴ Ibid.

²²⁵ Ibid.

²²⁶ Ibid.

differences, the same way Carrington's book would to a child.²²⁷ He too acknowledges the influence of Donna Haraway, adding also science fiction and fantasy author Ursula Le Guin.

For Rappolt, the theoretical aspects of the exhibition are so evident, that he starts to question the need to constantly reference them in the texts.²²⁸ This remark suggests that Rappolt has certain convictions in regards to the relation between exhibitions and the way their theoretical background is expressed. What can be possibly discerned is his belief that if an exhibition has a strong conceptual framework, there is no need to constantly highlight it, or that, similarly to Davis, curators need to also appreciate art for its own merits.²²⁹ At the end of the review, he reverts to his original statement.²³⁰ The exhibition might vanish into thin air because of its illusionary and fluid nature and despite Alemani's preference for tangible works. Admittedly, the article concludes on a positive note. The critic indirectly suggested to his audience several aspects they should keep in mind upon visiting an exhibition; the show's contextual consistency, the possible negative disruptions during the visit, as such could occur because of the vast number of visitors, and the artworks' aesthetic qualities.

3.2.4. Marco Baravalle for *Necsus*

Researcher, curator and activist, Marco Baravalle, published an academic review of *The Milk of Dreams* Biennial in the peer-reviewed journal, *Necsus*.²³¹ His academic writing style, as well as the number of references used, immediately diversifies his critique from the ones previously mentioned in this paper. It is clear that he writes mostly for an audience of art and culture connoisseurs, instead of a broader public who might be interested in learning more about the exhibition. In the first few paragraphs of his essay, he develops his reasoning for not considering Alemani's Venice Biennial groundbreaking. Issues of posthumanism and attempts to include a higher percentage of women and non-binary artists in exhibitions are, as Baravalle states, a common encounter in the artworld today. For Baravalle, while this is a cause for celebration, it does not mean that it is always successful. As he suggests, the 2022 Venice Biennial is nothing more than an example of a superficial and opportunistic endeavour. Instead of reinforcing the ideas of interconnectedness, ecology, feminism and posthumanism, it proves to be an expression of neoliberal thinking. This is demonstrated,

²²⁷ Rappolt, "59th Venice Biennale Review"; Carrington, *The Milk of Dreams*.

²²⁸ Rappolt, "59th Venice Biennale Review."

²²⁹ Ibid.; Davis, "The 2022 Venice Biennale."

²³⁰ Rappolt, "59th Venice Biennale Review."

²³¹ Baravalle, "*The Milk of Dreams*."

according to the writer, by Alemani's tendency to imagine a reality without conflict or power relations. He agrees with Davis's review to the fact that the curator touched upon the ecological and scientific subjects, only enough to be able to frame her exhibition, while she avoided suggesting alternative narratives.²³²

In the middle of his essay, Baravalle states that he is not interested in offering a visual analysis of the artworks.²³³ According to the critic, the curatorial ideology behind their installation did not contribute to any radical interpretation. Furthermore, Baravalle mentions that even if an institution expresses its interest towards fighting privilege, this does not necessarily translate into action. He enforces this argument by commenting on the way the Venice Biennial, as well as the city of Venice, present themselves as products for the tourists. The selection of women and non-binary artists also enforces the writer's belief of neoliberal restrictions in this exhibition setting. He mentions that they are predominately selected when they are recognized by the, mostly western-influenced, art market. According to his thinking, even the Awards Ceremony comes to dispute Alemani's approach of women's solidarity and friendship, as the Venice Biennial is, after all, a competition. To end his review, Baravalle promotes an alternative curatorial endeavour, that of Ruangrupa's Documenta Fifteen.²³⁴ The Indonesian collective, he describes, remained faithful to their values of sharing resources.²³⁵ This poses a clear contradiction to *The Milk of Dreams*, where similar ideas are only stated and not brought into fruition. Baravalle's essay warrants a more thorough reading of the 2022 Venice Biennial, combined with a comparative analysis with Documenta Fifteen. In this example of academic criticism, the visual analysis is not deemed necessary. The focus is on the philosophical background of the exhibition and the sociopolitical theories on which the writer bases his review.

3.2.5. Rosalyn D'Mello for *Stir World*

Feminist writer and art critic Rosalyn D'Mello states in the headline of her review that 'The 59th Venice Art Biennale Milks More Than Just Dreams'.²³⁶ Her text starts with a lengthy visual analysis of the works. She appears almost enchanted by the amount of female inspired themes, as well as the inclusion of artworks referring to birth and motherhood, Cecilia

²³² Baravalle, "*The Milk of Dreams*"; Davis, "The 2022 Venice Biennale."

²³³ Baravalle, "*The Milk of Dreams*."

²³⁴ Documenta Fifteen, "About."

²³⁵ Baravalle, "*The Milk of Dreams*."

²³⁶ D'Mello, "The 59th Venice Art Biennale."

Vicuña's *Bendígame Mamita* (Figure 14), among others. She even shares a personal insight; her effort to combine the responsibilities of her work and taking care of her own child while in the exhibition space. Returning to the focal point of her review, she wonders: "Could it really be that the world's oldest biennale was indeed canonizing, however belatedly, artistic practices that were invested in maternal-metabolic-materialist methodologies?"²³⁷ She continues on a positive note, commenting on the quality of Alemani's curatorial approach, the flow of the exhibition, and the artists' selection. D'Mello gives the idea that she enjoyed so much what she saw during her visit, that she almost feels badly expressing that she is not fully satisfied. However, the exhibition's theoretical background is not convincing, given D'Mello's identity as a "Third World feminist of colour".²³⁸ This admission reveals her primary interest in discussing issues of identity and inclusion.

The critic discerns that she fully appreciates the theories of western thinkers such as Donna Haraway, Silvia Federici and Rosi Braidotti.²³⁹ She is however dissatisfied by the lack of representation of non-western literary figures in the exhibition related texts, although she does not make any suggestions of thinkers who should be included other than British-Australian feminist writer Sara Ahmed. Instead, she asks,

"Are we fated to always footnote white women in conversations on post-humanist discourse, even though the subject has always been central to Indigenous Place Thought and feminist activist acts performed by people of colour world over?"²⁴⁰

Still, she remarks, the same white names are being repeated to establish this Venice Biennial's theoretical context, which eventually contradicts the inclusion of artistic diversity.²⁴¹

D'Mello attributes Alemani's disregard towards such writings, to the fact that the curator did not even seem comfortable labelling the exhibition as feminist during interviews.²⁴² This occurrence, according to the writer, reveals that Alemani is unfamiliar or does not have a deep understanding of non-western feminist practices. Quoting poet Quinn Latimer's review, she mentions that even the time capsules reveal a Eurocentric approach to art history, further establishing the absence of BIPOC (Black, Indigenous and People of

²³⁷ D'Mello, "The 59th Venice Art Biennale."

²³⁸ Ibid.

²³⁹ Ibid.

²⁴⁰ Ibid.

²⁴¹ Ibid.

²⁴² Ibid.

Colour) theorists.²⁴³ Rosalyn D’Mello this way, uses her review to stimulate a conversation about how non-western theories are treated, whether they are appropriated without being fully understood, and the ways they could be rightfully recognized.²⁴⁴ To do so, she points out not only what she considers the exhibition’s insufficiencies, but also its positive qualities, providing her readers a well-rounded retrospective.

3.3. Chapter Conclusion

The 59th Venice Biennial received a plurality of reviews. Each one was distinctive in terms of what aspect of the exhibition each writer chose to focus on. Ben Davis and Rosalyn D’Mello were not satisfied by the show’s theoretical background, while for Mark Rappolt it was blatantly evident.²⁴⁵ Marco Baravalle, who identifies as an activist, believes that *The Milk of Dreams* did not do justice to the serious subjects on which it focused.²⁴⁶ For Chris Clarke, who was probably more interested in the visitor’s experience, there was nothing left to add that was not covered by Alemani’s curatorial approach.²⁴⁷ The only critic, however, who wrote in depth about issues of representation in female non-western philosophical thought, was Rosalyn D’Mello, a feminist woman of colour, according to her byline.²⁴⁸ Similarly, the writing style and the emphasis on the visual analysis varied among the critics. Baravalle, who wrote in an academic tone, did not delve into the visual analysis, as it was not part of his argument.²⁴⁹ The rest of the essays, which address a broader readership, painted an image of the critics’ experience upon walking through the show.²⁵⁰ Rappolt even introduced this part of his review as a necessary evil coming with his job description.²⁵¹

The five examples of criticism reveal different aspects to the role of the art critic, in accordance to what was discussed in the previous chapter.²⁵² Criticism in the case of the 59th Venice Biennial functioned as a connecting link to art history, and as an instrument of

²⁴³ D’Mello, “The 59th Venice Art Biennale”; Latimer, “59th Venice Biennale.”

²⁴⁴ D’Mello, “The 59th Venice Art Biennale.”

²⁴⁵ Davis, “The 2022 Venice Biennale”; D’Mello, “The 59th Venice Art Biennale”; Rappolt, “59th Venice Biennale Review.”

²⁴⁶ Baravalle, “*The Milk of Dreams*.”

²⁴⁷ Clarke, “59th Venice Biennale.”

²⁴⁸ D’Mello, “The 59th Venice Art Biennale.”

²⁴⁹ Baravalle, “*The Milk Of Dreams*.”

²⁵⁰ Davis, “The 2022 Venice Biennale”; D’Mello, “The 59th Venice Art Biennale”; Rappolt, “59th Venice Biennale Review”; Clarke, “59th Venice Biennale.”

²⁵¹ Rappolt, “59th Venice Biennale Review.”

²⁵² Davis, “The 2022 Venice Biennale”; D’Mello, “The 59th Venice Art Biennale”; Rappolt, “59th Venice Biennale Review”; Clarke, “59th Venice Biennale”; Baravalle, “*The Milk of Dreams*.”

guidance towards exhibition visitors, giving them advice on various points of attention. Certain critics, such as Ben Davis viewed criticism as an opportunity to continue the long-standing conversation between aesthetic and conceptual aspects of art.²⁵³ Baravalle's academic review was mostly in line with the political objectives of art criticism and D'Mello saw her platform as a chance to make Alemani face her inconsistencies in terms of inclusivity and non-Western identity.²⁵⁴ Most of the critics attempted to hold the Biennial and Alemani accountable for her curatorial choices and brought forth additional arguments in a conversation, which the institution had already started.

²⁵³ Davis, "The 2022 Venice Biennale."

²⁵⁴ Baravalle, "*The Milk of Dreams*"; D'Mello, "The 59th Venice Art Biennale."

Conclusion

The main research question of this thesis was pertaining to the identification of contemporary roles of art criticism in relation to the field's history. This research problem was brought to the surface by Elkins' and Lijster's statements regarding the obstacles art criticism is currently facing.²⁵⁵ The first chapter of this thesis focused on the historical functions of art criticism. Critics in the eighteenth century saw their occupation as an opportunity to examine moral, social, and political subjects.²⁵⁶ Moreover, they took on the role of public educators in art matters and promoted the culture of their country. In the nineteenth century critics not only evaluated artworks, but also believed it is their responsibility to introduce new artists and movements to their readers and to demonstrate their support to new artistic endeavours.²⁵⁷ During the eighteenth and nineteenth century, naturalism was the preferred aesthetic approach in art assessment. Formalism, the premise of evaluating art based on its formal characteristics, first appeared in England in the twentieth century, but took over a great part of the critical discussions in the United States because of Greenberg and his successors.²⁵⁸ As the twenty-first century approached, the critical dialogue shifted to interests around identity and inclusion.²⁵⁹

The second chapter was concerned with the current condition of art criticism. It has become evident that the diversity in opinions, along with globalisation, and the arrival of the digital age in the current century, has stemmed conversations amongst historians and critics, about a crisis in the field.²⁶⁰ Academics, such as Professor Thijs Lijster, have attempted to identify new objectives of art criticism, to re-establish the field's relevance. What has been put forward in this paper, however, is that the field's theories were ever-changing, as diverse arguments about the nature of art criticism usually co-existed. Moreover, through the analysis of the experts' thoughts about art criticism in the 'Superscript 2015 Panel', it was proven that active professional critics still find certain historical roles, as those have been identified in the first chapter of this paper, relevant; the task of introducing new art to the public, holding

²⁵⁵ Elkins, "Questionnaire on 'The Contemporary'," 11; Elkins, "On the Absence of Judgement"; Lijster, "Where is the Critic?"

²⁵⁶ Houston, *An Introduction to Art Criticism*; Wrigley, *The Origins of French Art Criticism*.

²⁵⁷ Houston, *An Introduction to Art Criticism*; Wrigley, *The Origins of French Art Criticism*; Harries, "Hegel on the Future of Art"; *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, "Henry Cole."

²⁵⁸ Houston, *An Introduction to Art Criticism*, 45-46, 59-63; Greenberg, "Towards a Newer Laocoon."

²⁵⁹ Houston, *An Introduction to Art Criticism*, 68-73.

²⁶⁰ Elkins, "Questionnaire on 'The Contemporary'," 11; Elkins, "On the Absence of Judgement"; Lijster, "Where is the Critic?"

institutions accountable, and keeping the market in check.²⁶¹ The existence of non-institutional critics, albeit challenging for professionals, was not seen by the experts of the panel as an inhibiting factor in the practice of criticism. Instead, the experts approach the digital sphere as a welcome medium of inclusivity. Regarding feminist criticism, it became clear that, since the beginning, it was examined somewhat separately from the rest of the critical theories, which still affects the way it is approached by critics today.²⁶²

The third chapter introduced the case study of *The Milk of Dreams* exhibition in light of the 59th Venice Biennial, in an endeavour to identify additional roles of art criticism today in relation to the field's history. Five reviews by professional critics were analysed based on the popularity of their mediums of publication and the critics' remarks, in an effort to distinguish additional objectives of art criticism today.²⁶³ Those reviews centred around themes of diversity, politics, aesthetics and the conceptual background of the exhibition. The critics, with the exception of Marco Baravalle, offered a visual analysis of their visit. The analysis in this thesis confirmed that the themes from the art critical tradition return in present day art criticism. The exhibition was, of course, examined in a contemporary light by the critics, so their arguments reflected current day discourses. Nevertheless, means of assessment which were progressively developed in the past, such as the evaluation of artworks based first on their aesthetics and later on their contextual aspects, are investigated today simultaneously and considered equally important. For this chapter only one female critic was included, which was also the only one who primarily highlighted issues of diversity, feminism, and inclusion in the show. The reason behind this decision was not for a lack of consideration, but because the available critiques by women were much less than those from their male counterparts. Furthermore, the already quoted critique of *e-flux* editor Quinn Latimer by D'Mello provided further insight to feminist art critic Katy Deepwell's remark that women writers are almost exclusively quoted by female feminist critics.²⁶⁴

Regardless of the controversy around the crisis in art criticism, the lack of recognition of its history, or a primary and cohesive theory, it appeared that the discipline still has much to offer.²⁶⁵ It is true that the current diversity in the field can create confusion, as it became

²⁶¹ Schreiber, Fitzgerald, Knight and Gat, "Superscript 2015 Panel."

²⁶² Jones, "Contemporary Feminism"; Mondloch, "The Difference Problem"; Deepwell, "Art Criticism."

²⁶³ Baravalle, "*The Milk of Dreams*"; Davis, "The 2022 Venice Biennale"; D'Mello, "The 59th Venice Art Biennale"; Clarke, "59th Venice Biennale"; Rappolt, "59th Venice Biennale Review."

²⁶⁴ Latimer, "59th Venice Biennale"; D'Mello, "The 59th Venice Art Biennale"; Deepwell, "Art Criticism."

²⁶⁵ Elkins, "Questionnaire on 'The Contemporary'," 11.

apparent by Elkins', Lijster's and Houston's remarks.²⁶⁶ Nevertheless, diversity also offers the possibility to assess exhibitions from different points of view and outside of restrictions. As right or wrong in critical judgement is not an issue, critics now have the freedom to explore different ways of engaging in the important conversations already started by institutions or academic circles. Unfortunately, this is not the case for feminist criticism as it is still considered a subsection of the discipline.²⁶⁷ It is only mentioned in specific conversations and not included in the broader discourse provided by art critical texts. While the history of the field is not made explicit by critics, this analysis showed that it is present in their reviews; today's critical texts are often based on past theories and arguments, such as the continuous debate between aesthetic and contextual aspects of artworks and exhibitions. Furthermore, as it became clear from this thesis, it is exactly because of this history that professional critics have retained their authority; professionals, who are tasked with expressing their opinions, base their judgments today on traditional assessments of art, relating to the works' aesthetic and contextual elements, as those have derived from the discipline's history since the eighteenth century.²⁶⁸

This thesis offered a general retrospection of art critical functions from the eighteenth through the twenty-first century in an effort to identify current roles of art criticism. However, the subject of current critical assessment of art or the lack of contemporary definitions of art criticism could be further developed with interdisciplinary research in the subjects of politics and feminism. It became clear that Marco Baravalle has already provided an example of how art criticism could function in a political context; the critic made sharp remarks regarding Alemani's curatorial approach and the Venice Biennial's social, political and economic influence for the city of Venice and the art world in general.²⁶⁹ Furthermore, Baravalle brought forth another example of a recurring art exhibition, the fifteenth edition of Documenta by the Ruangrupa collective.²⁷⁰ The final result in Documenta Fifteen, according to Baravalle, remained faithful to the curators' values, in contrast to Alemani's Venice Biennial, whose themes of solidarity were overshadowed by the event's neoliberal context.²⁷¹ A future analysis of how criticism functions in assessment of the political context within

²⁶⁶ Elkins, "Questionnaire on 'The Contemporary'," 11; Elkins, "On the Absence of Judgement in Art Criticism"; Lijster, "Where is the Critic?"; Houston, *An Introduction to Art Criticism*, 77-79.

²⁶⁷ Jones, "Contemporary Feminism"; Mondloch, "The Difference Problem"; Deepwell, "Art Criticism"; D'Mello, "The 59th Venice Art Biennale."

²⁶⁸ *Cambridge Dictionary*, "Critic"; Houston, *An Introduction to Art Criticism*; Wrigley, *The Origins of French Art Criticism*.

²⁶⁹ Baravalle, "The Milk of Dreams."

²⁷⁰ Documenta Fifteen, "About."

²⁷¹ Baravalle, "The Milk of Dreams."

which exhibitions are curated, could prove useful in holding institutions accountable for their practices. In this paper it was already put forward that feminist criticism is still addressed as a segregated practice within the field of art criticism.²⁷² Delving deeper into the dilemma of judging art based on issues of identity and representation versus quality, regardless of the creator's identity, could guide to a clear understanding of the most important elements in art evaluation and, subsequently, the role of feminist criticism within the discipline. Finally, the art critical roles proposed in this paper can hopefully facilitate academics in concretely defining the art critical practice in the twenty-first century. Art criticism is a helpful tool in evaluating today's social and political circumstances with respect to the artworld, if only the conversation could shift from the alleged art critical crisis, to a new art critical potential.

²⁷² Jones, "Contemporary Feminism"; Mondloch, "The Difference Problem"; Deepwell, "Art Criticism"; D'Mello, "The 59th Venice Art Biennale."

Appendices

Appendix I: History and Background of the Venice Biennial

The Venice Biennial, which was founded in 1893, promotes research in art through the work and exhibitions of the departments of art, architecture, cinema, dance, music, and theatre.²⁷³ It strives to strengthen its relationship with the locals, such as students and teachers, through educational programs, organised visits, participation of regional schools and collaborations with Italian and international Universities, such as the Royal Academy of Arts in London, the University of Lima, and the SRH Berlin University of Applied Arts.²⁷⁴ Moreover, it takes an active role in supporting young artists' research, by connecting them to international established mentors, through the Biennale College international program for the art, dance, theatre, music, and cinema departments.²⁷⁵ All those initiatives enforce the idea of a World Art and offer the opportunity for a multiplicity of voices to be heard through an established event.

The Venice Biennial's inaugural exhibition was brought to life in 1895 under the initiative of the mayor of Venice, Riccardo Selvatico and included Italian as well as international artists by order of invitation.²⁷⁶ In 1907 the first international pavilion opened for Belgium, designed by Léon Sneyers. It was in 1910 that the first prominent international artists were featured, Gustave Klimt and Auguste Renoir. By 1914 five more international pavilions were included, alongside the Belgian and Italian, for Russia, Germany, United Kingdom, France and Hungary. In 1920 the title of the first official president of the Biennial was appointed to Giovanni Bordiga and in 1922 the first exhibition with African sculptures was included. In 1930 the board of the Biennial, went under the control of Italy's fascist government.

Professor of History Maria Stone explains in her essay 'Challenging Cultural Categories: The Transformation of the Venice Biennale Under Fascism' that the new agenda introduced by the fascist Italian government to the Venice Biennial was focused on turning the event into a profitable tourist attraction.²⁷⁷ As Stone explains, the government introduced

²⁷³ La Biennale di Venezia, "The Organization."

²⁷⁴ Ibid; La Biennale di Venezia, "Biennale Sessions."

²⁷⁵ In *The Milk of Dreams* exhibition, works by four artists of the Biennale College, Simnikiwe Buhlungu, Ambra Castagnetti, Andro Eradze, and Kudzanai-Violet Hwami, were included. La Biennale di Venezia, "Biennale College Arte."

²⁷⁶ La Biennale di Venezia, "From the Beginnings Until the Second World War."

²⁷⁷ Stone, "Challenging Cultural Categories," 189.

new categories in the exhibitions, such as music, cinema, theatre, and decorative arts, in order to attract larger audiences, not only coming from the European cultural elite, but also Italian middle classes, such as lawyers and shop owners.²⁷⁸ Another important addition to the exhibitions was the section for public art, murals, frescoes, and mosaics, which often represented fascist ideals.²⁷⁹ Public art not only challenged the notions of art ownership, acting as an equalising factor between the financially successful elites and the middle classes, it also provided work to the potentially rebellious lower class citizens. The inclusion of entertainment activities, such as the Film Festival, art awards and the possibility to purchase souvenirs encouraged the visitors to travel, and consume, in several parts of the city of Venice.²⁸⁰ New advertising techniques, such as train ticket discounts, were implemented in order to interest visitors who would normally choose to spend their vacation elsewhere.²⁸¹ Even though the Venice Biennial was targeting people from the middle class and was trying to shift the narrative of the event from high culture to mass consumption and entertainment, the primary promotional materials still retained their exclusive bourgeois character.²⁸² The institution did not want to lose its initial source of income, the European elites, and at the same time found it useful to take advantage of them as a selling point.

The second world war however caused interruptions in the organisation, resulting in a five year stay of art exhibitions.²⁸³ The return of the International Art Exhibition in 1948 was of a historical retrospective nature, featuring works by the impressionists and various modern and contemporary artists.²⁸⁴ It also opened the door in the following years for American abstract expressionists to take part. Japanese cinema and theatre were introduced for the first time in Europe by the Venice Biennial during the years between 1951 and 1954, continuing this way the organisation's global aspirations. In 1964 pop art was presented to the European audience, with Robert Rauschenberg winning the Gran Premio, and in 1972 the International Art Exhibition had its first curatorial theme, *Work or Behaviour*. In 1979 each of the artistic departments received its own director of organisation, which revealed an intention for a more specialised and professional treatment of each artistic section.²⁸⁵ In 1980, an alternate year between art exhibitions, architecture was added to the already established art, music, theatre

²⁷⁸ Stone, "Challenging Cultural Categories," 186.

²⁷⁹ Ibid, 197-198.

²⁸⁰ Ibid, 190-192.

²⁸¹ Ibid, 187.

²⁸² Ibid, 187, 202.

²⁸³ La Biennale di Venezia, "From the Beginnings Until the Second World War."

²⁸⁴ La Biennale di Venezia, "The Post-War Period."

²⁸⁵ La Biennale di Venezia, "From the '70s to the Reforms of 1998."

and cinema departments.²⁸⁶ 1995 marked the Biennial's centenary with the historic international exhibition *Identity and Alterity*, bringing together works by famous artists, such as Yves Klein, Andy Warhol, Marcel Duchamp, Edvard Munch, Pablo Picasso and Marcel Duchamp.²⁸⁷ In 1998 the Biennial formed a private legal entity and was renamed Società di Cultura La Biennale di Venezia and in 1998 dance was first included to the program. The exhibitions of 2001 marked a visitor record of 243.000 and sixty-three foreign country participations.²⁸⁸ In 2005 an international symposium of contemporary art was organized by art critic Robert Storr, titled *Where Art Worlds Meet: Multiple Modernities and the Global Salon*. In 2021, during the Covid-19 pandemic, the Biennale College Arte organised its first international call for young artists under thirty and, finally, in 2022 Cecilia Alemani presented *The Milk of Dreams* International Art Exhibition, which was the case study of this thesis.

²⁸⁶ La Biennale di Venezia, "From the '70s to the Reforms of 1998."

²⁸⁷ Ibid; Clarke, "Art and the History of the Body," 208-210.

²⁸⁸ La Biennale di Venezia, "The Recent Years."

Appendix II: Chris Clarke's Review for *Art Monthly*

Review: 59th Venice Biennale: *The Milk of Dreams*

Chris Clarke finds a parallel timeline revealed.



Simone Leigh, *Brick House*, 2019.

The three years since the previous Venice Biennale have encouraged us to imagine other worlds. A collective fear of contamination through human interaction, the replacement of face-to-face conversations with computer screens, the prohibition on experiencing art *in the flesh*. Individuals might easily disappear within themselves, to prefer inner space to the stark conditions of external reality and, while it is too straightforward to say that ‘The Milk of Dreams’, curated by Cecilia Alemani, is a direct consequence of the pandemic lockdown, its liberating, fantastical effects and sense of otherworldliness are undoubtedly amplified by this contemporary context. In any case, audiences appeared starved for authenticity, voraciously teeming into venues and spewing forth first impressions almost immediately upon exit.

Simone Leigh's bronze bust of an imperious black woman stands sentinel at the outset of the Arsenale, serving as a figurehead and a foreshadowing of what lies beyond. With braids cascading from her hairline, tied off in cowrie shells and framing an eyeless face, her inscrutable, impassive bearing suggests an inviolable distance from the demands of the congregating spectators below. Along the walls surrounding the broad circular hem of her skirt, an array of black-and-white collograph prints by Belkis Ayón reveals ambiguous beings engaged in the occult activities of the secretive Afro-Cuban Abakuá fraternity. These wide-

eyed, masked and enigmatic figures infer a range of contrasting associations with Leigh's work: concealment and disclosure, initiation and exclusion, vision and blindness. The themes run, in turn, like a leitmotif throughout the exhibition. What are we granted access to and what remains unseen, out of reach? What have we been missing and what happens when the orthodoxies of history are overturned and the accepted consensus upended?

A series of five miniature 'time capsules', intermittently positioned across both venues of the Biennale, provide a necessary corrective. Here, Alemani gathers objects and materials relating to different aspects of artistic production, from concrete poetry to automata and cyborgs, to posit an alternative archive, a repository of obscured and overlooked contributions to her overarching narrative. In the Central Pavilion of the Giardini, a section entitled 'The Witch's Cradle' explores themes of metamorphosis and hybridity, encompassing Claude Cahun's disarming photographs of her head trapped within a bell jar, film footage of the German expressionist dancer Mary Wigman's convulsive choreography, and Leonora Carrington's *Portrait of the Late Mrs. Partridge*, 1947, a chimerical female figure who carries – or is turning into – an oversized blue-feathered bird (Carrington's collection of illustrated fairy tales for her son, *Leche del sueño*, gives 'The Milk of Dreams' its title). The entire room is swathed in plush golden carpet that seamlessly creeps into shimmering painted walls, an unsettlingly tactile decor that reminds one of Meret Oppenheim's famous fur-lined cup and saucer: the artist is represented here with an equally disconcerting image of a woman's neck transmogrifying into a cow's hoof.

A suite of canvases by Cecilia Vicuña, painted during the period of the 1973 coup in Chile, suggests a poetic response to political turmoil, as if such events can only be articulated by allegory or mythology. In *Bendigame Mamita*, 1977, the artist's mother (who saved the artwork during Vicuña's exile in London) holds a guitar aloft so that her left eye magically overlaps with and peers through its sound hole, while an array of vignettes from her life occupy the upper third of the composition. *La Comogente (The People Eater)*, 2019, was remade from a lost 1971 original and provides a very different vision of individual creativity. A nude giantess swallows a line of naked figures, marching inexorably into her maw, while balancing herself against a cityscape. 'I dreamt I had to eat evil doers,' Vicuña explains, 'digest them, and defecate them for my shit to fertilise the land, so a new civilisation can be born.' The instinct that compels expression can be turned into the justification of tyranny.

You hear Mire Lee's work before you see it: *Endless House: Holes and Drips*, 2022, is a kinetic assemblage of ceramic entrails and motorised pumps audibly dribbling a slurry of liquidised clay. Its tendrils are slung over an armature of scaffolding, a flayed skeleton of

unrecognisable limbs oozing a viscous solution, turning the body inside out. A pool of fluid drains through the concrete floor, presumably feeding back and sustaining itself. In Eglė Budvytytė's mesmerising film *Songs from the Compost: mutating bodies, imploding stars*, 2020, made in collaboration with Marija Olšauskaitė and Julija Steponaitytė, a cast of androgynous adolescent performers enact crab-like movements, languidly unfurl and slide down sand dunes, and coil their bodies together with moss-covered tree trunks. Prosthetic talons protrude from their fingers and barnacles cling to their legs, and, against a reverberating auto-tuned hymn – 'hello / I am a portal / I am a border line between stone and animal intelligence' – their alienating otherness, of physical modification and non-binary identification, proposes a new evolutionary stage.

There is this syncretic impulse throughout the exhibition, positing an expanded, holistic worldview which melds nature and technology, science and mythology, and where the individual is merely one component amongst a wider constellation of human and non-human entities. This perspective is tangible on entering Delcy Morelos's *Earthly Paradise*, 2022, a vast installation of soil blended with cloves, cinnamon, hay and flour. The scent warmly engulfs and intoxicates visitors as they pass between channels carved out of the densely packed earth; I spied several people surreptitiously lifting their face masks to inhale the aroma, a rejuvenating reminder of normality. There are a few occasions like this in the Arsenale, where Alemani hands over a broad expanse of space to a single artist, and the shift in scale and tempo provides a welcome relief from the more concentrated aggregations of paintings and objects. Kapwani Kiwanga's *Terrarium*, 2022, comprises sweeping, semi-transparent painted draperies that partition the building's wide-open thoroughfare into discrete niches while silhouetting nearby artworks in hues of sunset orange-yellow. Glass boxes, with internal curved compartments filled with fine sand, attest to this sense of containment, of the earth captured and contorted into forms (or melted into glass itself). These twin pursuits of the ecological and the fantastical are perhaps best married in the Arsenale hall's grand finale: Precious Okoyomon's installation of sprawling vegetation, trickling streams, stone gardens, live butterflies, and various totemic figures rendered in lamb's wool, dirt, yarn and blood. Entitled *To See the Earth before the End of the World*, 2022, the dreamlike environment has a discomfiting subtext: the sugar cane stalks and invasive kudzu vines (introduced to the US by government officials in response to the over-cultivation of cotton) hark back to networks of slavery and colonialism.

If one of the legacies of Surrealism is not to take objects at face value, then 'The Milk of Dreams' similarly keeps its politics subtle, addressing the outside world only obliquely and

indirectly. This ostensibly introspective approach belies a quietly radical agenda, as gestures towards difference and alterity are inextricably enmeshed within the exhibition's propulsive trajectory. The narrative of an inherently female, queer and post-colonial surrealist history pulses subconsciously, thrumming underneath the official canon of melting clocks, sliced eyeballs and phallic pipes (that are not pipes). There is, instead, another history that unfolds throughout, and one that very quickly feels essential, as if this parallel timeline was always running alongside our own, repressed but patiently waiting to take over.

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Appendix III: Ben Davis's Review for *Artnet*

Art Criticism

The 2022 Venice Biennale Is an Artistically Outstanding, Philosophically Troubling Hymn to Post-Humanism

"Post-humanism" is the master key to the big show. But what does it mean?



Precious Okoyomon, *Earth Before the End of the World* (2022) at the Venice Biennale. (Photo by Stefano Mazzola/Getty Images)

Ben Davis - May 2, 2022

The last edition of the Venice Biennale, the Ralph Rugoff-curated “May You Live in Interesting Times” from 2019, was a grimly elegiac show, full of portents of a civilization falling apart. I called it the “we’re-all-gonna-die-ennial.” Cecilia Alemani, the curator of this year’s 59th edition of the all-important international art show, was named in early 2020, just as the pandemic was set to hit Italy.

Since, there have only been more portents of civilizational collapse: the horrors of COVID, the war in Ukraine, the now terrifyingly close climate change point-of-no-return. Yet the 2022 Biennale, with the poetic title “The Milk of Dreams,” feels lighter, not darker—full of myth, color, and literal magic. As Alemani says in the interview that opens the mammoth, close-to-800-page catalogue of the show, “despite the climate that forged it, this is an

optimistic exhibition, which celebrates art and its capacity to create alternative cosmologies and new conditions of existence.”

The Biennale’s opening gambit in the Giardini section of the show is actually positively whimsical. Orange telescopes have been installed around the lawn, so you can peer up at the roof of the Central Pavilion, where Cosima von Bonin has placed a row of capering cartoon sea creature sculptures. It’s as if the show is asking its viewer to look up from our present situation, into imagination.



Telescope pointed at the Central Pavilion as part of a work by Cosima von Bonin for “The Milk of Dreams.” Photo by Ben Davis.

There’s something to think about in the contrast between 2019 and 2022 Biennales. I think it is more than just a “return of beauty Biennale” after a “political Biennale” (an oscillation that has marked this event traditionally).

But first, some assessment of Alemani’s show on its own: It’s very good.

For a number of reasons, “The Milk of Dreams” feels destined to be remembered as a landmark, to be studied and debated. It’s full of surprises but is also unusually holistic and coherent throughout the Biennale’s vast spaces. It feels like a synthesis of a lot of recent conversations in art: the interest in the spiritual and the mythic; the recovery of historical women artists (a vast majority of the artists in the show are women); the attention to the legacy and continued relevance of alternative Surrealisms; the focus on undoing colonial

structures of thought via art. But at the same time, “The Milk of Dreams” feels like a singular vision of Alemani, judiciously chosen, full of quirks and kinks.

Highlights

There’s a focus on embodied experience, and a satisfying rhythm to the show. It is full of moments of thoughtful call-and-response between works.



Simone Leigh’s *Brick House* greets visitors in the opening gallery. Photo by Ben Davis.

The Arsenale begins with Simone Leigh’s giant bronze bust *Brick House* (2019), from her “Anatomy of Architecture” series of woman-architecture hybrids. *Brick House* shares its chamber with the haunted, smoky black-and-white images of the late Cuban printmaker Belkis Ayón, which draw on the lore of a Cuban secret society. Leigh’s Black female figure has no eyes, the artist’s symbol of centered interiority; Ayón’s works often dwell on the figure of a mythical princess, Sikán, who is conventionally shown as having only eyes.

All the way at the other end of the long passageway of the Arsenale, the show comes to a first climax in another soaring chamber that feels like a deliberate contrast to the awe and reverence of that first room: Barbara Kruger’s *Untitled (Beginning/Middle/End)* (2022), full of monumentalized, ominous texts in her signature style. Here, we are in the anxious media battlefield of the present, full of free-floating unease.



Barbara Kruger, *Untitled (Beginning/Middle/End)* (2022). Photo by Ben Davis.

Turning right, then, down the final leg of the Arsenale space, you arrive at the actual conclusion of the building's display: Precious Okoyomon's installation *To See the Earth Before the End of the World* (2022), a rolling garden, full of bushy human forms, a rumbling abstract soundtrack, a meandering path, and an actual brook. It could be about bringing you into alignment with the earth. Or it could be prefiguring a depopulated world (it's filled with kudzu and sugarcane meant to overtake it in the course of its run).

Okoyomon's room feels like it holds the spirit of the mysteries of the Leigh/Ayón room and the anxieties of the Kruger room together, in suspension. You pass from a sense of rooting in tradition and the past, to confronting a charged present, to a future that could go either way.



Katharina Fritsch, *Elephant* (1989). Photo by Ben Davis.

Over at the Central Pavilion space, things feel a bit less clear-cut as a narrative (but then the Arsenale is easier to read, as a linear space).

It begins with a giddy showstopper, Katharina Fritsch's life-size green elephant on a pedestal. Exploring the show, you eventually ascend to a gallery featuring the only performance in "The Milk of Dreams," Romanian artist Alexandra Pirici's *Encyclopedia of Relations* (2022–ongoing), where a crew of performers loll, pose, embrace, sing, and do coordinated dance routines, combining and recombining in the space. It feels like walking into someone else's dream.

So you go from the spectacle of Fritsch's hyper-real simulation at one end, to the spectacle of "live sculpture" at the other.



Performers in Alexandra Pirici's *Encyclopedia of Relations* (2022–ongoing). Photo by Ben Davis.

There are some galleries where I feel a little lost at the Central Pavilion, spatially and conceptually. But there are many more spectacular set piece moments: the gallery of Cecilia Vicuña's imaginative, and quite funny, paintings; a dark-painted room dedicated to the hardcore fairytales of Paula Rego; Agnes Denes's majestically intelligent work, displayed under glass, laying out the progression of tools that have shaped human consciousness since the Stone Age in a fantastic hieroglyphic chart; the display dedicated to the Danish-born Louis Marcussen, who adopted the gender-neutral name of Overtaci and dreamed up a parallel universe of cat-like female creatures while living in a psychiatric hospital.

Neo-Surrealist painting is everywhere throughout the show, in lovely and engaging forms. Louise Bonnet's Pissier *Triptych* is a gas; Jana Euler's strange trick painting of an unravelling face is as odd as any painting I've seen recently.



Jana Euler, *Venice Void* (2022). Photo by Ben Davis.

There's also quite a bit of sculpture with an edgy mythological presence. Ali Cherri's earthen beasts have an elemental power, as do Hannah Levy's menacing, spidery constructions. Myths and monsters recur again and again.

As usual for big biennials, there's a formidable amount of video. But it's judiciously deployed and ultimately manageable. Of these, Marianna Simnett's *The Severed Tail* (2022) is certainly the most talked about, with its hilariously grotesque S&M dog show full of humans dressed as animals, and its climactic encounter with a vomiting, perverted demon king.



Marianna Simnett, *The Severed Tail* (2022). Photo by Ben Davis.

In a show full of references to myths past, Simnett’s opus feels closest to presenting something like a brand-new myth. I think I will have nightmares about it.

Histories

The most distinctive curatorial flourish of “The Milk of Dreams” is the inclusion of five historically focused all-female capsule shows, two in the Arsenale and three in the Central Pavilion.

Each of these is marked off from the rest by a special color scheme and decor. But even apart from these installation flourishes—ocher carpet and low lights in the capsule called “The Witch’s Cradle,” or cerulean walls and giant black-and-white photos showing the included artists performing in “The Seduction of the Cyborg”—you would sense that Alemani’s Biennale has abruptly shifted gear in these rooms.



A display in “The Witch’s Cradle” gallery in “The Milk of Dreams,” showing Alice Rahon, *Untitled* (n.d.) and *The Juggler* (1946). Photo by Ben Davis.

In contrast to the lush clarity of the rest of the Biennale’s curation, here you are suddenly plunged into a lot of historical material displayed under glass or in dense clusters. Reading becomes essential. Different genres and modes of making rub shoulders, including things wholly outside what you traditionally think of as art.

In one mini-show dedicated to the metaphor of the container or vessel, there are non-functional ceramic vase-sculptures (Hawaiian potter Toshiko Takaezu) paired with tiny medical models of the womb (19th century Dutch doctor Aletta Jacobs). In another mini-

show about body augmentation, facial prosthetics for victims of war (Anna Coleman Ladd) dialogue with far-out Martian-themed costume sketches (Alexandra Exter).



Display dedicated to the facial prosthetics of Anna Coleman Ladd (1878–1939). Photo by Ben Davis.

“Corps Orbite” is the name of a room in the Central Pavilion that includes displays of concrete poetry, but also Ouija board drawings and hoax seance photos. In “The Witch’s Cradle” mini-show—which is actually not about witches, and is harder to summarize the longer you stay with it—Laura Wheeling Waring’s Black Egypt-themed cover illustrations from the 1920s for W.E.B. Du Bois’s magazine *The Crisis* share a vitrine with a flamboyantly pleated pink dress once worn by Surrealist Leonor Fini.

I could spend a long, long time in these galleries, which brim with stories. I went in expecting them to be clearly defined surveys of discrete alternative art histories. It turned out that they were not. In all but the gallery dedicated to light and op art by women (“The Technologies of Enchantment”), they reveal themselves to be riffs on loose themes, melting together many historical paths.



Works by Laura Grisi in the “Technologies of Enchantment” gallery. Photo by Ben Davis.

The capsule shows serve to ground this show in a long perspective and fill up the surrounding contemporary art, which is so easily experienced as ephemeral trend and commercial product, with a sense of destiny and commitment. But they also seem to be another one of the many ways that this show celebrates unexpected pairing and hybrids.

Post-Humanism?

There’s a lot in the show, but here’s what’s is not in the show: there is little of the protest imagery and images of environmental loss that is everywhere in recent art; little in terms of issue-driven photo documentary or lecturing video essay; little specific evidence of current events at all (the late insertion of a work by Ukrainian folk artist Maria Prymachenko into a symbolic place in the Central Pavilion is a sort-of exception).



Maria Prymachenko, *Scarecrow* (1967). Photo by Ben Davis.

Indeed, the Biennale’s biggest faceplant is its most didactic essay-style film: the normally good Lynn Hershman Leeson’s video *Logic Paralyzes the Heart* (2022), which has something of the air of a school play made from a New York Times article about the perils of Artificial Intelligence (albeit one with a cameo by *Thor: Ragnarok* actress Tessa Thompson).

Temperamentally, Alemani is indisposed to the didacticism of much “biennale art.” This is part of why “The Milk of Dreams” has such a warm, inviting atmosphere overall, even at its darkest points.

Yet the lyrical texture of the show is not simply presented as a matter of preference. It’s on a mission. This is a show, Alemani says, “rooted in the post-human,” seeking to “challenge the Renaissance and Enlightenment notion of the human being—especially the white European male—as motionless hub of the universe and measure of all things.”

With this framework in mind, a lot of different levels of this Biennale snap neatly into alignment: the curatorial focus on an alternative art history of women; the emphasis on sensation, imagination, and fantasy over “message art”; the specific set of recurring images (myths, magic, cyborgs, hybrid creatures, interspecies trysts). All flow from a diagnosis of what ails civilization: a selfish, instrumental, and masculinist rationality, out to separate itself from its others and dominate them.



Ali Cherri, *Titans* (2022). Photo by Ben Davis.

Philosopher Donna Haraway, author of both the *Cyborg Manifesto* and the *Companion Species Manifesto* (the latter less cited but much more relevant here), is the patron saint of the wall texts. But Alemani has said that the show's intellectual keystone is actually Deleuzian feminist philosopher Rosi Braidotti's "Posthuman Critical Theory." It is worth dipping into the catalogue to see what this offers. It comes down to this: a program, Braidotti writes, of "redefining traditional binary oppositions, such as nature/culture and human/non-human, paving the way for a non-hierarchical and more egalitarian relationship among members of the same species as well as between different species."

Now, this is not entirely new as a big-art-show framing device: in the first half of the 2010s, it was very trendy for curators everywhere to be into "speculative realism" and "new materialisms," earnestly musing about whether rocks could think (Braidotti weighed in on the speculative turn in art in the pages of *Frieze* at the time).

I understood those pancosmic interests as a displaced reaction to the environmental crisis, as a way to seem world-altering enough to meet the times, while also being arty enough to base an art show on. Still, it often seemed to be borderline obscurantism. (Without making too much of it, I have to mention how striking it is that the first post-pandemic Venice Biennale takes aim at "Enlightenment reason" as what ails society, even though the pandemic saw a disastrous rise of anti-science thinking—as much among affluent and liberal New Age and wellness types as among conservative cowboys.)

Practically, is Braidotti's "post-human" idea of undoing nature-culture hierarchies much more than just the realization that "we are one with nature"? Does it point us toward meaningful action, or just towards some kind of quasi-spiritual epiphany? It's a merit of "The Milk of Dreams" that it takes its premise seriously enough to show what the stakes might be.

Among other books, the Biennale shop is selling Marxist environmental writer Andreas Malm's hard-hitting *How to Blow Up a Pipeline*, whose very title stresses the need for urgent—and very definitely instrumental—action. But this is not the feeling given off by the art of the Biennale itself, whose "post-human" environmentalism is probably best illustrated by Hong Kong-based polymath Zheng Bo's 16-minute video *Le Sacre du printemps (Tandvärkstallen)* (2021).



Zheng Bo, *Le Sacre du printemps (Tandvärkstallen)* (2021). Photo by Ben Davis.

In exquisitely respectful, static long shots, Zheng’s video presents a group of nude Nordic men dotted across a lush green woodland landscape, as they have sex not just *in* the forest, but *with* the forest—silent at first and then building to grunting, pale butts pumping in and out.

For one long passage, the men stand on their heads and writhe against the trunks. The image is turned upside-down so that the forest floor is at the top and the slender trees seem to be supporting it like pillars, a device that seems to stress that Zheng is out to flip expectations. (“Of all the set criteria for Posthuman Critical Theory...,” Braidoti writes in the catalogue, “the most important is the tactical method of defamiliarization, that is to say, disconnection of the subject from familiar and habitual patterns of identity.”)

The wall text for *Le Sacre du printemps* explains: “Zheng Bo is committed to all-inclusive, multi-species relationships. Through a socially and ecologically engaged art practice, he forges an alternative path that de-emphasizes a human-centric worldview and strives instead for interconnectedness of all living beings.” Elsewhere, he has said that his work emerged from his concern with climate change and his effort to explore “how plants practice politics.”

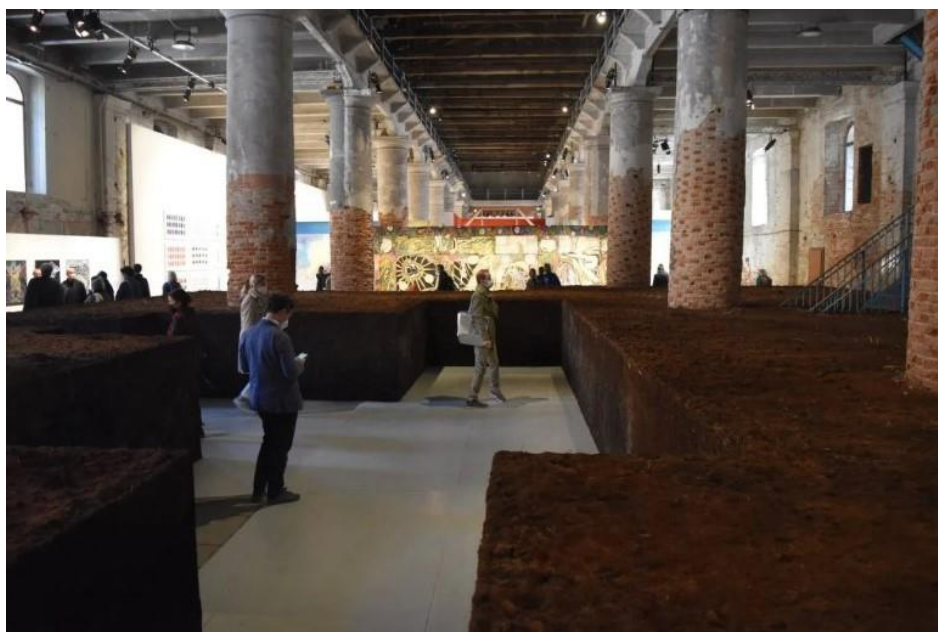
As a depiction of the delights of an eco-queer sexuality, the video is brazen and memorable (albeit a bit solemn for an erotic celebration, IMO). But if pleasuring yourself in (with?) the woods is somehow being proposed as the model for the earth activism we need now, that starts to lose me.

That starts to make it seem as if the allure of “post-humanism” represents the global intellectual classes, in despair about the possibility for human action to affect the problems weighing on the world, taking refuge in magical thinking...

Dreams

I think it’s fair to raise questions. Debating the stakes of a “post-human aesthetics” will surely be part of the legacy of this Biennale.

But asking for a mission or a program is itself a very instrumental way to think about an art show. And for my money, what is great about this show’s framework is its aesthetic richness, not its philosophical rightness.



Delcy Morelos, *Earthly Paradis* (2022). Photo by Ben Davis.

When I think about this show, I'll really think of thoughtfully planned, "you had to be there" details. Of Colombian artist Delcy Morelos's *Earthly Paradise* (2022), at the midpoint of the Arsenale, a low-slung structure made of bales of earth. Its smell, very much part of the work, is a subtle and very pleasant cinnamon-y perfume. It may be the central "image" I take away.

Or I'll think of the moment in Alexandra Pirici's performance where the performers ask you to stand with your eyes closed, and hold out your hands to make a new "haptic memory." Something soft and spiky appeared on my palm, gently turning. And, as promised, I still do have an imprint of its shape and texture and movement in my brain, without having let myself know what the mystery object was.

Or the bend in the Arsenale where three artists, all influenced by Haitian Vodou, are put together. The intricate, storybook detail of Célestin Faustin's 1979 painting of a lush, orderly Garden of Eden stays with me as a vision of imagined plenty.



Célestin Faustin, *Jardin d'Eden* (1979). Photo by Ben Davis.

The tenor of the times demands a high burden to claim relevance, and the result can be a muted and dutiful tone in art institutions. If *all* the elastic “post-human” framework of the 2022 Venice Biennale does is to bring together a great many unexpected and deserving figures into a configuration that feels personal and purposive and greater than its parts, then it is doing a great deal, actually.

I do believe that art, like dreams, can be a resource to discover “new conditions of existence,” as Alemani promises of this Venice Biennale. Dreaming can change reality, but you don’t generally dream in order to change reality. It is enough—and it is important—that dreaming gives your mind what it needs so that you might come back to face reality refreshed.

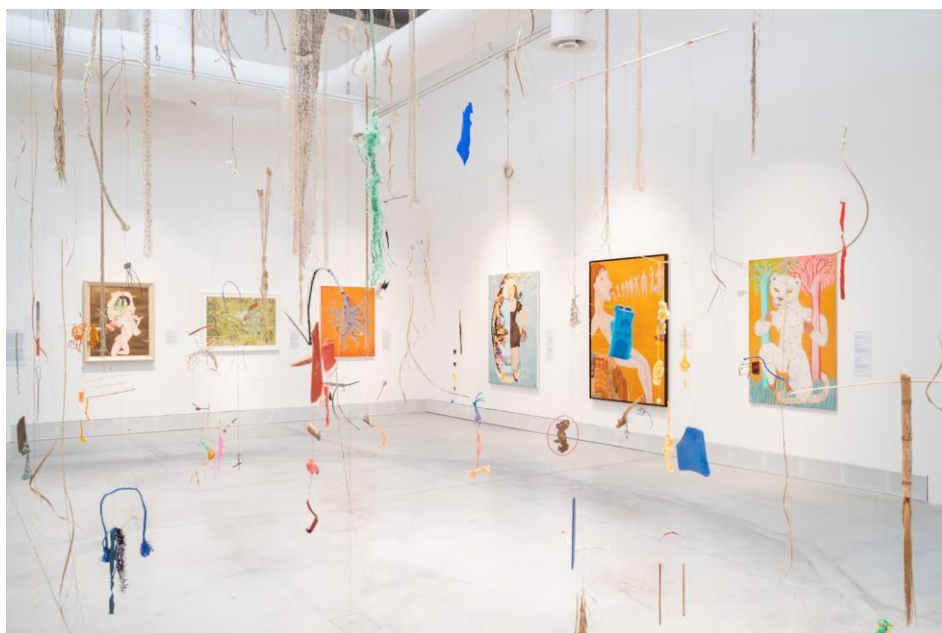
“The Milk of Dreams: The 57th Venice Biennale” is on view at the Arsenale della Biennale di Venezia, Campo de la Tana, 2169/f, 30122 Venice, Italy, and the Giardini della Biennale, C. Giazzo, 30122 Venice, Italy, April 23–November 27, 2022.

Ben Davis
National Art Critic

Appendix IV: Mark Rappolt's Review for *Art Review*

59th Venice Biennale Review: Revelation and Illusion

Mark Rappolt - Reviews - 27 April 2022 - artreview.com



Works by Cecilia Vicuña in 'The Milk of Dreams', 59th Venice Biennale, 2022. Photo: Marco Cappelletti; courtesy La Biennale di Venezia

There's a nagging sense that Cecilia Alemani's exhibition *The Milk of Dreams* might just vanish in a puff of smoke

Perhaps it was a result of the amber time of lockdowns and bad dreams of past Venice Biennales, but my recollection of these kinds of 'big' artworld event is that, more often than not, they offer you what's best described as the artistic director's aesthetic vomitorium, with disparate ideas, born of disparate contexts, splattered all over the walls and floors, with nothing other than the projections of the person responsible to connect them. Too much to see; too much to parse; too much to process in one sitting. (And, where travel is involved, the chances of multiple sittings are remote for anyone even pretending to be conscious of or monitoring their carbon footprint: and any sane person is doing that right now.) Of course, it's been a while (the profitably polyphonic 2020 Berlin Biennale to be precise); but my overwhelming feeling when first pushing through crowds of tourists – terrible what they're doing to the city; albeit fully conscious, despite having ticked 'here on business' on an

inflight survey form, that I was one of them – along Venice’s canals while wearing a hoodie and a mask to avoid progress-retarding chit-chat was one of trepidation.



The Witch's Cradle, in *The Milk of Dreams*, 59th Venice Biennale, 2022. Photo: Marco Cappelletti; courtesy La Biennale di Venezia



Seduction of the Cyborg, in *The Milk of Dreams*, 59th Venice Biennale, 2022. Photo: Roberto Marossi; courtesy La Biennale di Venezia

Given all that, *The Milk of Dreams* was something of a revelation. And in more ways than one. It featured many artists (213 in total of which 21 are men), about whom I knew little, offering the seductive potential of a first encounter. Tick. As importantly, its careful design (by Italy's Studio Formafantasma) and curatorial direction (Italy's Cecilia Alemani) achieves the delicate balancing act of orienting visitors while allowing them to imagine the possibility that they are being encouraged to orient themselves. Double tick. Unsurprisingly, it was as full of people as it was of artworks during the preview days and from the minute I touched down it felt like everyone (who managed to penetrate my hoodie-mask combo) was asking 'What do you think?' and 'What was the best thing?' – already busily constructing the latest iteration of the artworld's overarching consensus- and FOMO-culture. And that culture in itself is another, albeit less delicate, balance between orienting and being oriented.



Works by Paula Rego in *The Milk of Dreams*, 59th Venice Biennale, 2022. Photo: Roberto Marossi; courtesy La Biennale di Venezia

So let's get it out of the way: a room dedicated to the work of Paula Rego in the Giardini (one of several take-breath-and-pause-for-a-moment mini surveys of women artists' work, others of which are devoted, also profitably, to the subversive sloganeering of Barbara Kruger, fabric works by Rosemarie Trockel and a series of fantastical paintings by Cecilia Vicuña) was the best thing. And when it comes to thoughts they're still developing (a good sign).

In the Central Pavilion, Vicuña's paintings of fantastical creatures – *Leoparda de Ojitos* (1976), for example, is like some form of snow leopard with eyeballs instead of spots, human hands and feet instead of paws, grasping a pair of trees and opening her legs to display her genitals – introduce themes of metamorphosis, transformation and exchange (and a link to indigenous art practices) that permeate the rest of the show. They reach back to the surrealist work of Leonora Carrington, whose paintings are included in one of five historically focused micro-exhibitions that pepper the show – this one titled *The Witch's Cradle* and devoted to women artists associated with or working alongside surrealism. It's from Carrington's book of fairytales, written for her children, that Alemani's *The Milk of Dreams* takes its name. One online book review – by 'Emily' – declares that Carrington's *The Milk of Dreams* is 'everything that you would want to give to a child if you so much as want them to grow up – different – in like the best ways possible' – and there's a strong sense that this exhibition wants to give its audiences the possibility of the same. But Vicuña's themes stretch forward too, into paintings by Jana Euler, for example, or the sculptures of Ali Cherri (which also draw on Assyrian Lamassu deities). Although it's not clear whether this sense of continuum tells us that nothing is ever new or that there's always life in old dogs or old leopards. Nevertheless, there's a sense that eliding differences is an idea that runs through much of the exhibition.



Works by Jana Euler in *The Milk of Dreams*, 59th Venice Biennale, 2022. Photo: Marco Cappelletti; courtesy La Biennale di Venezia

The Milk of Dreams is dominated by meditations on what constitutes the body, what clothes the body and what distinguishes one body from another, with desire a gentle hum in the background. A little less gentle in Zheng Bo's *Le Sacre du printemps (Tandvärkstallen)* (2022), an inverted video shot in a Swedish forest and featuring five thrusting and grunting naked men, a continuation of his ongoing *Pteridophilia* series (2016-), exploring the potential interspecies erotic of humans and plants. Zheng's work finds echoes and reflections in Precious Okoyomon's *To See the Earth Before the End of the World* (2022), a garden at the end of the Arsenale featuring plants, totemic, anthropomorphic earth mounds, sugar cane and kudzu plants, the latter brought to the US from Japan to reintroduce nutrients to soil that had been drained by cotton plantations and now running out of control. Whether or not they run out of control here, however, may well depend on how much natural light can penetrate the Arsenale walls – which in itself is a further chapter in the general sense of an embattled relationship between humans and nature (the abusive flipside to Zheng's amorousness if you like) that also filters through the show.



Precious Okoyomon, *To See The Earth Before the End of the World*, 2022, in *The Milk of Dreams*, 59th Venice Biennale, 2022. Photo: Roberto Marossi; courtesy La Biennale di Venezia



Works by Ruth Asawa in *A Leaf a Gourd a Shell a Net a Bag a Sling a Sack a Bottle a Pot a Box a Container*, in *The Milk of Dreams*, 59th Venice Biennale, 2022. Photo: Roberto Marossi; courtesy La Biennale di Venezia

Indeed, echoes and reflections permeate the exhibition as a whole, in for example, the colourful boiled-sweet of Niki de Saint Phalle’s *Gwendolyn* (1966–90) and the massive, raw, anthropomorphic, adobe ovens that make up Gabriel Chaile’s family portrait. There’s a menacing humour too in the eccentric and tragically funny paintings of American Jessie Homer French (a wall text says she’s a ‘self-proclaimed “regional narrative painter”’) which feature burning oil rigs, deer wandering over graveyards and stealth bombers flying over the Mojave Desert, which rearticulate human–nature relationships as something more bizarre than erotic. A sensation that’s elegantly pushed forward by Homer French’s flattened, naive painting style.



Jessie Homer French, *Oil Platform Fire*, 2019. Courtesy the artist; Various Small Fires Los Angeles/Seoul; Massimo de Carlo. © Jessie Homer French

The exhibition is pinned as much around theory as it is aesthetics: most notably that of Donna Haraway (which, as well as being evident throughout the exhibition, provides the source-code for one of those mini historical displays, this one titled *Seduction of the Cyborg*) and Ursula Le Guin (whose 1986 essay *The Carrier Bag Theory of Fiction* anchors the micro-show *A Leaf a Gourd a Shell a Net a Bag a Sling a Sack a Bottle a Pot a Box a Container*). Outside these mini-displays, a working through of the issues surrounding the Anthropocene, identity politics and indigenous rights are constantly present in the artworks on display. Which does leave you wondering a bit as to how necessary the direct evocation of theory and theorists was in the first place.



Works by Gabriel Chaile in *The Milk of Dreams*, 59th Venice Biennale, 2022. Photo: Roberto Marossi; courtesy La Biennale di Venezia



Niki de Saint Phalle, *Gwendolyn*, 1966/1990, painted polyester resin on a metal base, in *The Milk of Dreams*, 59th Venice Biennale, 2022. Photo: Roberto Marossi; courtesy La Biennale di Venezia

Overwhelmingly, this is a show that triumphantly emphasises fluidity despite the Biennale's institutional fixity. And yet, particularly in the densely stocked Central Pavilion, there's always a nagging sense that all this really presents us with is an illusion (to paraphrase Georges Perec's theory of travel) of having overcome distance, of having erased time, while in reality it is only reality that's far away. And that art, as figured here, belongs more fully than one might like to the realm of dreams. Bombs, intolerance and violence belong to our current reality – from India to Palestine, to Ukraine and everywhere else you can imagine. For all that this exhibition is predicated, with its fetish for painting and sculpture, on art that is solid and tangible (at the expense of new media in its various forms), there's nevertheless a sense that it might melt into air.

Appendix V: Marco Baravalle's Review for *Necsus*

The Milk Of Dreams, or The Lukewarm Cup That Puts Commons to Sleep

December 8, 2022/in Autumn 2022_#Materiality, Exhibition Reviews, Reviews

In reviewing *The Milk of Dreams*, an enthusiastic Laura Raicovich summarises:

The exhibition features mostly women and non-binary artists and engages deeply with notions of transformation and identity beyond the anthropocentric. Plants, animals, and machines are integral; the hybridity of these forms emphasizes interconnectedness, solidarity networks, and alternate forms of knowledge production.[1]

These few lines could describe dozens of other shows around museums and biennials in Europe and in the US, and despite the fact that we have to welcome the diffusion of these trends and topics as good news, all that glitters is not gold. In what follows, I will try to articulate a critique of Cecilia Alemani's *The Milk of Dreams*, the 59th International Art Exhibition of the Venice Biennale.

I will argue that this exhibition is exemplary of the ideological function of the liberal democracy art industry today, a function of co-optation that mobilises posthumanism, theories of the compost, new-materialisms, and the decolonial – sometimes opportunistically, sometimes superficially, always for the aim of promoting them to the status of a new cultural logic of neoliberalism. In closing, I will briefly touch on *documenta fifteen* as a counterpoint to Venice. The difference lies in Ruangrupa's insistence on art and art exhibitions' (including their constituencies and their economies) modes of production in their choice to intervene and interrogate the mission, procedures, and institutional functions of *documenta*.

With Rosi Braidotti as its theoretical beacon, the Venice Biennale will be remembered for being heavily influenced by posthumanism. But the posthuman turn in contemporary art is hardly new. As noted by T.J. Demos, Carolyn Christov-Bakargiev (another Italian curator) imposed the trend already in 2012, at *documenta (13)*, resting the exhibition's theoretical foundation on 'Haraway's post-human constructivist approach'.[2] During a public lecture in 2014, the director of the Castello di Rivoli (who is second to none in detecting trends) suggested it was about time to move from the concept of the archive to that of compost.[3] This is an example of how the discursive space of the contemporary works, i.e. by presenting itself as a space of epistemological leaps, shifts, and earthquakes, while preserving its

institutional functions and social relationships unaltered. Therefore, the shift of buzzwords suggested by Bakargiev had to become incredibly popular in the ensuing years and up to the present day.

Around the turn of the millennium, the art world's obsession for archives indicated a shift in the aesthetic consideration of the document (as a source to interrogate reality) and suggested the possibility of deconstructing the monolithic history of modernity along postcolonial and postsocialist lines. The article 'An Archival Impulse' (2004) by Hal Foster and the exhibition *Archive Fever: Uses of The Document in Contemporary Art* (2008) curated by Okwui Enwezor are only two examples of the interest around the concept. Today the enormous fascination exercised on the art world by the concept of compost (revived by Alemani's guiding theme in the third exhibition:[4] 'the connections between bodies and the Earth'[5]) is due to its intellectual generative potential. It activates a rich and radical conceptual constellation, alluding to hybridisation, kinship, multispecies companionship, queerness, and the fall of binarism. At the same time, differently from the archive, the use of compost as a model for new forms of social life suggests the end of the primacy of human (reason) over matter. The redeemed status of matter is the common starting point of new materialisms, another very popular perspective in museums and biennials around the world.

Now, to be fair, posthuman and compost do not necessarily entangle. Haraway clearly states it:

We are compost, not posthumans; we inhabit humus, not humanity. Philosophically and materially, I am a compostist, not a posthumanist.[6]

A compostist roots her critique of human exceptionalism in what Haraway calls sympoiesis, literally 'making-with'. The term puts the accent on the entanglement between companion species that underline the collective process of producing systems, as opposed to 'autopoiesis' (self-making).

In its most radical expression, theories of compost fuel queer, decolonial, transfeminist, and climate justice activism. Of course, these are understood not as separate political fields, but seen in their intersection. Unfortunately, *The Milk of Dreams* is very far from these radical positions; on the contrary, it works as an effective machine of depoliticisation – a composter without composting. Nina Ferrante (a queer scholar and activist), referring to José Esteban Muñoz' 'concept of brown commons' argues

building up on this, we can also think of compost as the brown commons that José Esteban Muñoz tried to stir up shortly before he died, leaving his text unfinished and full of questions.[...] The commons is woven by a non-restorative practice, one that does not try to fix the damage of colonial capitalism, and yet puts up infrastructures to live in the turbulence; after all, standing in the commons is never placid, it is a way to inhabit conflict.[7]

Alemani's curatorial operation aims instead at taking the compost and the commons away from conflict – she depoliticises them. The inter-connectedness and hybridity of her exhibition is much more sympathetic to Bruno Latour's idea of the world as a 'thorny web of everything'. [8] This explicitly anti-Marxist conception of the world as an all-encompassing intertwining is instrumental in thinking a reality drained of dialectics, i.e. drained of conflict. As Andreas Malm argues:

The bush, the thorny web of everything, is all there is. One must give Latour credit here for correctly identifying the difference between his approach and that of historical materialism: yes, dialectics is the dance of opposites and requires at least a dyad.[9]

Speaking of 'wordling', the speculative fabulation (SF)[10] at work in *The Milk of Dreams* performs a world view of entanglements without troubles, a world of hybridisations in absence of power relations. In his review of the show, commenting on the posthumanist conceptual framework and noting the absence of works that directly address the ecological and social contradictions of the present, Ben Davis writes:

I understood those pancosmic interests as a displaced reaction to the environmental crisis, as a way to seem world-altering enough to meet the times, while also being arty enough to base an art show on. Still, it often seemed to be borderline obscurantism. (Without making too much of it, I have to mention how striking it is that the first post-pandemic Venice Biennale takes aim at 'Enlightenment reason' as what ails society, even though the pandemic saw a disastrous rise of anti-science thinking – as much among affluent and liberal New Age and wellness types as among conservative cowboys.) Practically, is Braidoti (Sic!)'s 'post-human' idea of undoing nature-culture hierarchies much more than just the realisation that 'we are one with nature'?[11]

Allow me a brief methodological parenthesis. By now the reader will have guessed it: I am proceeding (almost) without mentioning any of the artworks shown in *The Milk Of Dreams*. The reason is not that I want to revamp a kind of postmodern mode of critique that understood art as an endless textual game, dismissing objects in favour of their analysis as social constructs. If I favor context over content, it is exactly because I find it hard to experience the specific radical character of the encounter with an artwork if the social and institutional framework is not contributing to activate it (or if it is designed to neutralise it). So, walking through the Giardini and the Arsenale, I found it difficult to surrender to the works of art, i.e. to experience their autonomy at work, to perceive that specific potentiality (potenza) to embody futurity and the possibility for better worlds, or as Jacques Rancière puts it: art's gift to project a new 'form of-life-in common'[12] (even one that is more ecological and less anthropocentric). I found it almost impossible to share that space of autonomy with artworks that, since Friedrich Schiller up to Object Oriented Ontology, is described as the thing at stake in the aesthetic experience. I am of course going to extremes. I can be deeply touched by a Francis Bacon painting even in a super posh Upper East Side gallery. But as exhibition guides abound, my provocation is meant to highlight the ideological function of a certain model of curating. Sure, my inability to translate into radical feelings the radical narration of *The Milk Of Dreams*, to offer myself without reluctance to becoming other in the art compost, could simply be a personal problem, maybe the effect of a residue of historical materialism that, despite the pervasiveness of new materialisms, refuses to go away. Or maybe it is the effect of living in Venice and of experiencing the porosity of the Biennale with the city.

As I underlined elsewhere,[13] during the last twenty years the Biennale lost a productive relationship to the city, progressively closing itself inside the Giardini and the Arsenale, while simultaneously 'conquering' more square meters in the neighborhood of Castello. Maybe I have it totally wrong, but it seems any boundary between the city and the exhibition has actually fallen. The experience the tourism industry offers to the masses of people flooding the calli is exactly the same the Biennale offers to the masses of trendy cultural tourists: the city and the art institution think of themselves mainly as products to be sold and consumed. Venice and the Biennale are not apart – they are one. The international art exhibition, with its roaring post-pandemic success, has achieved the status of a real abstraction, the same acquired by contemporary Venice according to Wolfgang Scheppe.[14] The problem is not the distance between Venice and the Biennale, the problem is their consubstantiality.

After all, this is not only a local problem. Gregory Sholette affirms that today we find ourselves immersed in what he calls a 'bare art world'. Paraphrasing Giorgio Agamben's notion of bare life, the New York-based artist argues that neoliberalism has such a pervasive hold on art that it erases any room for autonomy.[15] This is tantamount (if we do not confuse the autonomy of art with a vulgar art pour l'art attitude) to the nullification of that political potential of art that Adorno theorised in his writing on aesthetics.[16] *The Milk Of Dreams* mobilises a radical arsenal but in fact confirms the narrowing autonomy of art in relation to neoliberalism and, at the same time, does nothing at all to suggest an alternative/radical heteronomy, to actually become compost.

So, come to Venice and enjoy the critique of Western rationalism in an openly nationalist framework. Promote women and non-binary artists as long as they can be celebrated as individual (and marketable) authors. Get fascinated by non-reproductive kinships, multispecies companionships, and solidarity networks in a competitive exhibition married with the classic 'winner takes it all' art logic.[17] Dematerialized art prefers sellable objects without shame in the name of Object Oriented Ontology. *Rock the Witch's Cradle* (one of the historical capsules comprised in the exhibition alongside "Corpse Orbit", "Technologies of Enchantment", "A Leaf a Gourd a Shell a Net a Bag a Sling a Sack a Bottle a Pot a Box a Container", "Seduction of The Cyborg"), but do not expect subversive enchantments. The museum style exhibition design reduces the witch to a wunderkammer curiosity, hints at the fashion of the esoteric, but does not address the theme of the relationship between witch-hunting and original accumulation, nor even those of the rural struggles of women re-enchanting the world by imposing the commons against capitalist abstraction.

As feminist art critic Elvira Vannini points out:

Returning to *The Milk of Dreams*, anger becomes legitimate when reading Cecilia Alemani's text and coming across quotations from Silvia Federici, an indispensable reference for entire generations of feminists and transnational movements, yet 'cleansed' from the immediately materialist and conflictual dimension of the struggles against capital, the reproduction of our lives, the control of bodies, avoiding the use of words such as capitalism, patriarchy, social inequalities and injustices, popular feminism, eluding any trajectory of her theoretical and militant commitment.[18]

And there is more. Piazza Ucraina (Ukraine Square) is an outdoor exhibition hosting works by several Ukrainian artists. It is a dutiful stance of the Biennale following the brutal Russian aggression and the subsequent war, but the difference with the past should be noted. Piazza Ucraina is not an actual square; it does not inhabit one of the many Venetian campi. It occupies, instead, a small portion of the Giardini, between the Stirling Pavilion and the cafe tables. It is an artwork among artworks, not daring to occupy public space as had happened with the 1974 Biennale: without a number or a catalog, imagined as an act of solidarity with Chile a year after Pinochet's coup, the 1974 Biennale had chosen the form of the urban festival. Brigadas of muralist painters exhibited works in Campo S. Polo and Campo S. Margherita, and painted the walls of the town of Mira and on those of Marghera's industrial district. Today, the heteronomy of the Biennale's art makes it dependent on neoliberal logic, but abhors the confusion between art and politics that can occur in public space.

Last but not least, in Venice it is possible to celebrate decolonial politics while the fortunes or misfortunes of BIPOC and Global South artists are decided by market tastes conveyed through Western art galleries and museums (think of Cecilia Vicuña, who appeared on the poster of La Biennale only a few months in advance of her solo exhibition at the Guggenheim in New York). These are the same institutions (especially those in New York) whose ties with different colonial enterprises and the prison industrial complex have been highlighted by campaigns such as Decolonize this Place and Strike MoMA[19]. Of course, the point is not that Vicuña or BIPOC or non-binary artists should refuse proposals, awards, and visibility. But this does not mean that we should confuse a hegemonic effort (such as *The Milk of Dreams*) with an anti-hegemonic one.

The Gramscian category of hegemony was recently summoned by Oliver Marchart who wrote a history of the last six editions of documenta as the history of the struggle for primacy between hegemonic and counter-hegemonic art tendencies. The clash between the two is read as an ongoing confrontation between centralisation and de-centralisation. The first term alludes to grand curatorial gestures, depoliticisation, prevalence of Western geographies, anti-intellectual stances, and transformism. The second term stands for the opposite: politicisation, collective authorship, postcolonial and decolonial geographies, and theorisation. Marchart argues that documenta fifteen, curated by the Indonesian collective Ruangrupa, takes politicisation on a whole new level, first of all by highlighting the cruciality of the commons. But the big difference with *The Milk of Dreams* is that the Kassel exhibition was not simply about the commons:

documenta is seen as a huge platform for sharing and redistributing resources. The political in documenta fifteen, it seems, is not so much a matter of conflict; it is a matter of the commons. But this impression should not deceive us. Many of the participating artist-activist groups are deeply involved in political conflicts back at home, and the communal, in the absence of other resources, is the main resource that allows them to sustain their struggle. There is nothing apolitical to this idea of 'sharing'; rather, sharing is a precondition, in locally specific situations, for emancipatory political action, and documenta has been made a tool by ruangrupa to support these actions.[20]

Ruangrupa, inspired by lumbung, an Indonesian word naming a collective rice barn, tested documenta as a possible way to share resources (cultural, symbolic, and financial) with other collectives. It did not adapt its way of working to the expectations of the hegemonic art world; instead it attempted the opposite – to turn one of its centres into a temporary commons. Nothing similar, despite the many radical references, even crossed Cecilia Alemani's mind, and this makes all the difference. Certainly documenta fifteen raises many questions that are worth posing: did this sharing of resources work even for the smaller members of the lumbung, or did some invitations reproduce the usual conditions of precarity typical of art labour? Was the antisemitism scandal the result of the peculiarity of the German context, or is it part of a larger attempt by hegemonic forces to regain some ground? Does the clear demarcation between the dozens of paintings and sculptures on view at La Biennale and the dozens of DIY collective environments and diagrams seen in Kassel actually describe the alternative between market and commons aesthetics? To what extent will documenta fifteen open space for the art commons in the near future?

One of the most important critical tasks, especially from the point of view of a European or Western positioning (like mine), is to avoid the exoticisation of the collectives involved in documenta fifteen. There is a risk of consecrating them to the status of contemporary good savages who romantically rely on the commons because of a lack of financial resources or modern infrastructures. Let us not turn them into post-global Magiciens de la Terre.[21] The lumbung is not magic, primitive, or simply a matter related to identity politics or survival; it is a political choice, and this is proved by the attitude of Ruangrupa towards documenta, by their choice not to adhere to a hegemonic system of art values. The risk of Western paternalism goes hand in hand with a certain hypocritical attitude toward privilege, because the public utterance of one's privilege is not a performative act (or it

actually is, but in a problematic way). I can say ‘I acknowledge my privilege as a white European male’ and at the same time I can retain all my privileges, but conversely the risk is to render invisible my class status (as if all Europeans were alike). While acknowledging one’s privilege is crucial, it must not be an empty exercise; it needs to be a starting point to fight privilege, putting in place collective aesthetic-political processes that insist on those same (class, gender, race, and species) intersections where the violence of capitalism is at work. The same goes for an institution. It can host feminist, Marxist, or posthuman art, it can show a disclaimer stating that its building stands on indigenous land, but it can, at same time, continue to gentrify its neighborhood. Moreover, superficial adhesion to decolonial etiquette has further consequences: it pictures Western history as a monolithic apparatus, erasing the subaltern, minor, conflictual, and decentralised drives of which it is rich. So, the healthy activity of deconstructing Western privilege and its ideological scaffolding should be accompanied by the study of Western genealogies of art and political commons, maybe with the goal of building a global lumbung, a (decolonised) Internationale of art commons. Difference is celebrated, but structures should not be ignored because they show our common ground – they provide us with composters, not with their simulacra.

Gregory Sholette, for instance, recently told the paradigmatic story of being fired by the New Museum in 1991 for having planned an exhibition where curatorial agency was shared among collectives.[22] Harald Szeemann, in his diary reporting a series of studio visits leading to *Live in Your Head: When Attitudes Become Form* (1969), noted a conversation with Italian radical artist Piero Gilardi. Gilardi asked him to give up individual curating and dissolve it into an assembly of artists.[23] History says that Szeemann had other plans about how to develop the independent curator’s craft. It is then because I do recognise these common genealogies of commons, and because they are at work in my collective practice of (art) activism, that I can feel completely at home in Kassel in a room filled of diagrams on alternative economic models, while I feel totally alienated in Venice, in the belly of yet another curatorial ‘grand gesture’ a few meters away from where I live.

Author

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[1] Raicovich 2022.

[2] Demos 2016, p. 240.

[3] Carolyn Christov-Bakargiev. Leverhulme Lecture II | Worlding: From the Archive to the Compost <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=F8Jl8xvdHKM> (accessed 11 October 2022).

[4] The Milk of Dreams addresses three thematic areas: the representation of bodies and their metamorphoses; the relationship between individuals and technologies; the connection between bodies and the Earth.

[5] 'Cecilia Alemani Interviewed by Marta Papini, The Milk Of Dream' in *The Milk Of Dreams/Il latte dei sogni*, exhibition catalogue. Venezia: La Biennale di Venezia, 2022, p. 26.

[6] Haraway 2016, p. 97.

[7] Ferrante 2022, p. 41 (my translation).

[8] Malm 2018, p. 58.

[9] Ibid.

[10] 'SF is storytelling and fact telling; it is the patterning of possible worlds and possible times, material-semiotic worlds, gone, here, and yet to come.' (Haraway 2016, p. 31)

[11] Davis 2022.

[12] Ranciere 2009, p. 29.

[13] A series of critical annotations on the Venice Biennale in two articles: Baravalle 2020, pp. 533-541; and Baravalle 2022, pp. 297-312.

[14] According to Wolfgang Scheppe contemporary Venice works like a real abstraction, i.e. ‘not a product of the mind, but a societal organization which grants the abstract principles of exchange dominion over the concrete [...]. Life ceases to exist where abstract objective laws take hold in reality.’ Scheppe 2009, p. 108.

[15] Sholette 2017.

[16] As Peter Osborne argues: ‘Adorno’s argument is that the appearance of self-legislating form positions the work critically in relation to the demand for social functionality – including its own functional aspects, which it must somehow internally “resist” or counter, in order to achieve autonomy (meaning the illusion of autonomy); thereby allowing it to figure freedom. This is the “truth” of art, in this tradition: the figuring of freedom, or what Adorno refers to as a free praxis.’ Osborne 2012.

[17] ‘Artistic circulation is a winner-takes-it-all economy, [...] This economic arrangement causes most projectarians to be → poor , spawning stark inequalities between the select few and the impoverished many (→ D is for dark matter). Adding insult to injury, in the winner-takes-it-all economy, the winners are celebrated as the sole authors of their success, while the losers bear the brunt of systemically imposed failures, naturalised as their own personal imperfections.’ Szreder 2021, p. 242.

[18] Vannini 2021 (my translation).

[19] On the links between the board of trustees of MoMA with the prison industrial complex, the occupation of Palestinian land by the State of Israel, and the military industries, see the Strike MoMa Reader (2021).

[20] Marchart 2022, p. 52.

[21] Rasheed Araeen accused Jean Hubert Martin’s exhibition *Magiciens de la terre* (1989) of excluding non-Western artists from modernity, confining them to the territory of magic, as if developing countries lacked points of view within modernity and modern art institutions. See Araeen 1989.

[22] Sholette 2022.

[23] ‘Gilardi wanted to see the whole thing as an assembly of artists, from which the exhibition would then naturally emerge: no shipping of works, no art dealers, but rather the results of discussions among artists and the self-criticism of the museum’. Bezzola & Kurzmeyer 2007, p. 247.

Appendix VI: Rosalyn D’Mello’s Review for Stir World



Installation view, Gabrielle Chaile’s sculpture ovens with *Rosario Liendo*, 2022 in the centre at the 59th International Art Exhibition – La Biennale di Venezia, *The Milk of Dreams*

Image: Roberto Marossi; Courtesy of La Biennale di Venezia

Opinions

The 59th Venice Art Biennale milks more than just dreams

Cecilia Alemani’s main exhibition gathers together lost, stolen, forgotten, marginalised, maternal, non-canonised female, queer, non-binary, and indigenous artistic subjectivities.

by Rosalyn D’Mello | Published on: Sep 16, 2022

I was still reconstituting myself after having been swallowed by *Bendígame Mamita* (*Bless me Mommy*), Cecilia Vicuña’s oil on canvas portrait of her mother, painted in Bogotá in 1977, when my milk let down. I should have been besotted by the more obviously arresting detail—the maternal eye that occupies the guitar’s sound hole, the abstracted form of which has been reproduced countless, reappearing all over the Venetian lagoon as though it were a panopticon, serving as the graphic identity of the 59th edition of the Venice Art Biennale, curated by Cecilia Alemani. What had consumed me, instead, was the figurative assemblage in the top-right corner. Its sighting had baited, hooked, and lined not only my gaze but my

entire being, enveloped as it was in the aura of what Amber Jamilla Musser refers to as brown jouissance. A maternal body lies on surgical white sheets in the throes of birth, blood oozing into a pile that contrasts against the painting's aqueous-blue background. A still un-severed umbilical cord connects this body to the infant that has been delivered, face down, through the vaginal canal, that is in the process of being received by a uniformed nurse; implying an invisible, yet-to-be-expelled placenta is still performing its nutritive, immunological function.

This detail seemed to visually embody the term, 'Placenta Politics', coined by the feminist philosopher Rosi Braidotti "to indicate the materialist feminist biopolitics of the relation between the material maternal body, the placenta and the foetus". Braidotti insists that bio-political thinkers consider the maternal body and the placental assemblage: "If we focus on insemination, gestation and birth... what are we to make of the fact that the female body actually hosts and cares for the egg, then embryo, then foetus, then baby? The placenta is the operative factor of immunologically compatibility: it is formed by the extension of the maternal body's blood vessels into another tissue that both connects and separates the embryo from the maternal organism. It is ejected as an extra entity about thirty minutes after the birth has taken place. This is a far cry from the thanato-political or necro-political discourse of the tactical expulsion of alien elements or the aggressive elimination of the alien other. The paradigm of placenta politics presents instead a model of generative relationality."



Bendigame Mamita, 1977, Oil on canvas, Cecilia Vicuña.
Image: Courtesy of Rosalyn D'Mello

Within the painting's realm, this figurative assemblage is the fourth 'scene' in the life of its subject, the artist's mother. The accompanying wall caption offered more context: "Before Cecilia Vicuña's departure from Chile to study in London, the artist's mother arrived at her daughter's apartment, playacting as a journalist to interview her about leaving the country during an extended period of unrest." Soon after she left, the president, Salvador Allende, was ousted by a violent coup, altering the country's temperament, and apparently precluding her from returning to Chile. The text mentioned the potency of her mother's gaze, which the artist has described as 'a connection to the awareness of life itself'. "The painting is both a call to expand our perception and an homage to the transformative wisdom and power of a mother's love," it read.



Detail, *Bendigame Mamita*, 1977, Oil on canvas, Cecilia Vicuña. Image: Courtesy of Rosalyn D'Mello

The edible nature of my contact with the painting was undoubtedly primed by my ongoing speculative-feminist-investigative research, *In the Name of the Mother*, focussed on canonising matrilineal “outsider” artistic legacies. Here was an artist depicting her own birth, placing herself in umbilical dialogue with her mother’s creative body. As I hastily exited the central pavilion of the Giardini to locate my partner and our hungry infant who were awaiting me at the entrance, I felt thrilled by the acknowledgement that the watchful eye that had been trailing my body since I entered Venice was a maternal one, in the same way as the knowledge that the Biennale’s title, *The Milk of Dreams*, traced its provenance to the consequence of the artist-writer Leonora Carrington’s creative output as mother, a series of zany illustrations drawn by her on the walls of her son’s room in Mexico, which later survived in diaristic form. I placed my three-month-old in the carrier so I could continue viewing (working) while he breastfed, thus inventing time, and ventured back in through the entrance, past Katharina Fritsch’s pedestalized 1987 sculpture, *Elefant/Elephant*, cast in dark chromium oxide green polyester from the mould of a stuffed elephant named ‘Bibi’, housed in the collection of the Zoologisches Forschungsmuseum Alexander Koenig in Bonn. Could it really be that the world’s oldest biennale was indeed canonising, however belatedly, artistic practices that were invested in maternal-metabolic-materialist methodologies?



Elefant / Elephant, 1987, Polyester, wood, paint, Katharina Fritsch. Image: Marco Cappelletti; Courtesy of La Biennale di Venezia

I noted a surprisingly literary quality to the curatorial language and architecture, designed by Alemani in collaboration with Formafantasma. Each room I walked into, out of, through, and between contained the tension of an erotic paragraph, with each artwork arranged preciously in relation to another, achieving the economy of interleaved sentences. The works spill out of the ‘time capsules’ they were programmed into, often oozing their way into a conceptual entanglement with a painting or an embroidery or a sculpture in the other hosting venue, the Arsenale, thus enabling numerous generative assemblages while facilitating cross-species conversations. The visitor’s seeing eye serves as vantage point, allowing for a host of meanings to emerge depending on where its gaze is directed.

For instance, Fritsch’s elephant, which subverts the monumental through its meticulous detailing of skin and its resurrection of a forgotten taxidermic being once in possession of sentience, is followed by a punctuating period—Maria Prymachenko’s 1967 gouache work, *Scarecrow*, an anthropomorphic being whose depiction is tailored in the registers of folk art. I read later that the work was a last-minute addition, which explains my inability to locate it within the catalogue. Alemani confessed to becoming aware of the artist’s work only when the Ivankiv Historical and Local History Museum in Kyiv, which housed several of her artworks, was burned down in February by the invading Russian forces in Ukraine. The last-minute inclusion reads like an act of resistance against the necro-politics of war.



Andra Ursuța’s sculptures dialogue with Rosemarie Trockel’s wool works and Mrinalini Mukherjee’s hemp figures, 59th International Art Exhibition – La Biennale di Venezia, The Milk of Dreams. *Image: Marco Cappelletti; Courtesy of La Biennale di Venezia*

This visual articulation then leads us to a massive room in which the mesmerising thread-based works of Rosemarie Trockel dance with Andra Ursuța’s sculptures of hybrid beings made by casting elements of her own body. I was reminded of the link an artist friend, Monica LoCascio, recently drew between thread, SCOBY, fascia—the thin casing of connective tissue that surrounds and holds every organ, blood vessel, bone, nerve fibre, and muscle in place—and shards of pottery ubiquitous to archaeological excavation sites, which stand testimony to the cross-cultural domestic significance of urns. All of these material elements, Monica argued, are rarely ever spoken about with the reverence they deserve. If you had your back to the wall behind which Prymachenko’s painting was displayed and looked diagonally to the left, the vista opened up to include three hemp figures by Mrinalini Mukherjee, which took me by surprise, reactivating her voice within my head. I re-heard her referring to them as ‘the rope things’ in our interview in 2013, telling me how she took a break from working in hemp when her mother, the artist Leela Mukherjee, was ill. “After she passed away, I didn’t feel like sitting at home and knotting this rope,” she had told me, explaining how she subsequently began working in the lost-wax process because of its immediacy, speaking of her reliance on bronze as a way of preserving the delicacy of moulded touch. When I had asked her how she contextualised her practise within the landscape of contemporary art, she said, “I am just a practising artist who wants to continue practising” and spoke of the whimsical nature of critical appraisal, how, when she first began making ‘the rope things’, her artist peers were overly hung up about whether it was art or craft, and how, when she moved on to bronze, they seemed to want her to continue doing the hemp works. Mukherjee died during the installation of her belated first retrospective in India, and although she had her friend circles, she had an air of loneliness about her that came from her work never receiving the validation it so richly deserved. I dwelled on the resentment she sometimes felt when I read the last line of the biography of Valentine de Saint-Point, whose woodcut series, *Metachoric Gestures* (1914-1923), was part of the *The Witch’s Cradle* capsule—“Having drawn heavy criticism from her former Futurist allies, she moved to Egypt, converted to Sufism, and died in Cairo in 1953, alone and forgotten.”



Vanshree, 1994, Woven, dyed fibre; Pakshi, 1985, Woven, dyed hemp; Rudra, 1982, Hemp fibre; Devi, 1982, Fibre, Mrinalini Mukherjee. Image: Courtesy of Rosalyn D'Mello

Even though there is obviously an architectural logic that allows for fluid movement between rooms, the curatorial language is nutritiously rhizomatic, reminding one of the fungal structures that is the holding ground for the fermented food, tempeh. The taut looseness allows for trans-temporal alignments to surface, like the video of a subversively dancing Josephine Baker resonates with Mary Wigman's *Hexentanz* (Witch dance), which similarly revels in its embrace of the grotesque and a sense of self-delight. There are stand-alone moments too, like suspended paragraphs that have the aura of indulgence. One room with Paula Rego's paintings and sculptures at the central pavilion at Giardini is an excellent example, as is Precious Okoyomon's *To See the Earth Before the End of the World* (2022), which occupies the final room at the Arsenale in which the lushly 'invasive' kudzu vine that the artist uses as visual code is host to an ecosystem. A sign at its entrance reported the presence of live butterflies. All sorts of similarly flourishing topographies were brought into the spectatorial realm, from Candice Lin's *Xternesta* (2022), which eludes description, but which plays with the delicacy of botanical study, healing practices, and a form of shamanism, to Delcy Morelos's *Earthly Paradise*, which is meant to remind viewers of the Latin etymology of the word human—humus. "Visitors can smell the earth's aroma mixed with hay, cassava flour, cacao powder, and spices like cloves and cinnamon, while sensing the soil's moisture, temperature, texture, and darkness," the caption informs.



Installation view, Paula Rego's work at the 59th International Art Exhibition – La Biennale di Venezia, *The Milk of Dreams*. *Image: Roberto Marossi; Courtesy of La Biennale di Venezia*



Installation view, Precious Okoyomon, *To See The Earth Before the End of the World*, 2022. *Image: Roberto Marossi; Courtesy of La Biennale di Venezia*

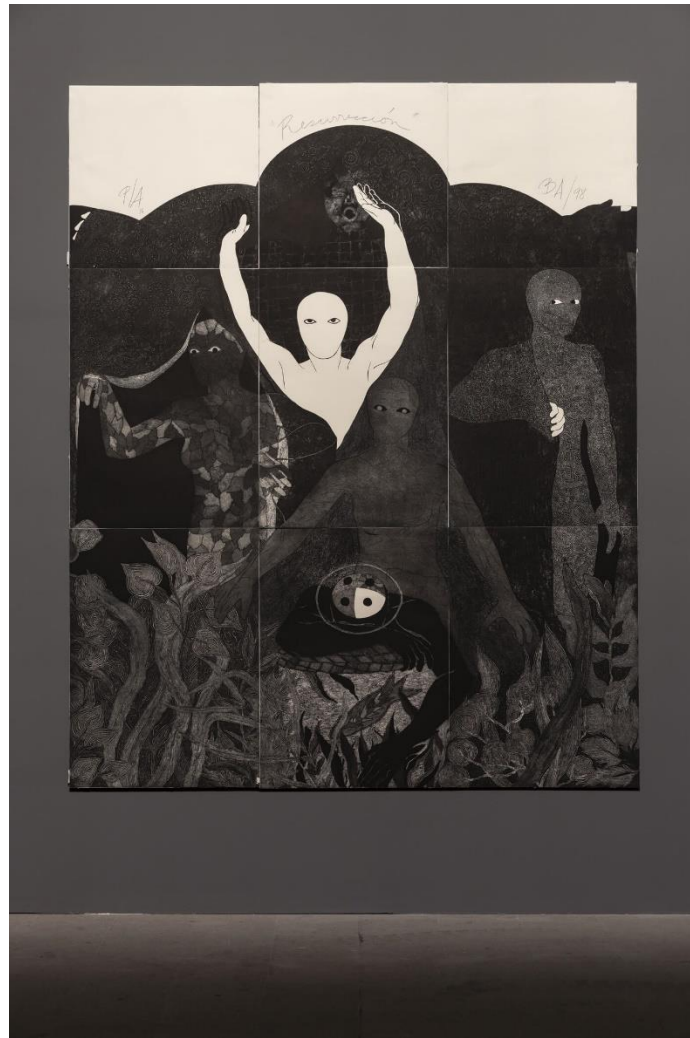


Xternesta, 2022, Installation, Glazed ceramic, reverse painted bound artist's recipe book, reverse glass painted tabletops with collaged paper elements, ceramic and porcelain objects, cast bronze, aluminium, and pewter, glass jars and bottles with pewter solder, silver talismans, and paper collage, various tinctures including abortifacients, indigo leaf, milky oat tops, and Clairvoyant Testosterone, subitism incense burner with ume, spice, and resin incense, copper sulphate crystalliser, taxidermied iguana with Chromium (III) Potassium Sulphate crystals, crystallised copper sulphate, blown glass terrarium, dead silkworms, scented lard, papier-mache, dried, resin-coated, and wax-sculpted plant material, copper electroplated Chinese herbs and mushrooms, kudzu bioplastic, kudzu root, dried reishi, alcohol, white urushi lacquer, fermented rice liquid, kombucha (black tea, sugar, yeast), Saint Malo mud, fermenting hardware, rocks, minerals, herbs, oak gall, poison, Candice Lin.
 Image: Roberto Marossi; Courtesy of La Biennale di Venezia



Earthy Paradise, 2022, Site-specific installation, Mixed media: soil, clay, cinnamon, powder cloves, cocoa powder, cassava starch, tobacco, copaiba, baking soda and powdered charcoal, Delcy Morelos. Image: Roberto Marossi; Courtesy of La Biennale di Venezia

One superlative moment involves the evocation of Ursula Le Guin's 1986 essay, *The Carrier Bag Theory of Fiction*, which builds from a seed planted in Elizabeth Fisher's, *Women's Creation*, that the first cultural device was probably a recipient, most likely a container, sling, or net carrier. Le Guin reminds us that the earliest humans most likely ate gathered seeds, roots, sprouts, shoots, leaves, nuts, berries, fruits and grains, possibly adding bugs and mollusks, birds, fish, rats, rabbits and other small fry to up the protein. But foraging didn't make for riveting fiction. Stories of the male hunter outsmarting his prey were seen as more compelling, explaining their persistence in the oldest stories and on the walls of caves. Le Guin reminds us that human civilisation would never have evolved had it not been for the food that was foraged for, primarily by women, who used some form of 'recipient' to collect, store, and serve it. Alemani revisits these ideas within the capsule, "A leaf a gourd a shell a net a bag a sling a sack a bottle a pot a box a container." One of the most exquisite works nestled within the display was a series of uteri depicting various stages of pregnancy, made by the company, Auzoux with papier mache. They are credited to Aletta Jacobs, the first woman to be admitted to a Dutch university, for many years the only female doctor in the Netherlands, who also wrote one of the first books that described the female body in detail, including the reproductive system. The catalogue contains a moving essay by Christina Sharpe, titled *What Could a Vessel Be?* which links the objects on display with the many poetic and political implications of vessel-hood, from the Transatlantic ships that transported slaves, displacing and dislocating so many lives to the boats containing migrants hoping to arrive on Mediterranean shores that frequently sink to cruise and cargo ships. Sharpe asks questions like, "What is a vessel for holding a skin? A membrane? A life?"; "Is a nest a vessel? Is an egg?"; "What is a vessel when another one of the world's richest men finances a supersonic space plane? More colonisation, more settlement, more violence, more brutal logistics of removal and moving people from one place to another." In Afro-Cuban artist Belkis Ayón's marvellous collographic prints, the magnificent sight of which I am still recovering from, the eyes appear as vessels, while Gabriel Chaile's work literally manifests as five sculptural art ovens, each one portraying a member of his family based on descriptions handed to him through word of mouth, the most astonishing being *Rosario Liendro*, after his maternal grandmother. It exerts a presence that seems to exceed and distend the boundaries of space and time.



Resurrección, 1998, Collography on paper, Belkis Ayón. Image: Roberto Marossi; Courtesy of La Biennale di Venezia

Overall, the curatorial gesture operates within the domain of an exceedingly generous hospitality that is daringly inclusive in terms of the artists it implicates and whose practices are given room to breathe, sing, and soliloquize, from art that is rooted in indigenous cosmologies to art made by queer people forced to inhabit mental asylums to the art of mystics, healers, prophets, witches, dreamers and lovers. I was reminded of the sentiment the protagonist expresses in Clarice Lispector's story, *The Sharing of Loaves*, which begins with the narrator ranting about having to share their Saturday with strangers at an obligatory luncheon thrown by a patient host who seemed not to be thrown off guard by her guests' desire to be elsewhere. When the narrator finally enters the living room for the lunch "that lacked the blessing of hunger", they are surprised at the feast on offer. "Saving nothing for the next day, there and then I made an offering of what I was feeling to what was making me feel. It was a way of living that I hadn't paid in advance with the suffering of waiting, a

hunger born when the mouth is already nearing the food. Because now we were hungry, a complete hunger that encompassed everything down to the crumbs.”

It feels a shame for me to demand more from a first-world curator, after the sumptuousness of the spread that was laid out, and yet, as a Third World feminist of colour, I find the lack of intersectional inputs on the theoretical front niggling. Must all thought on cross-species dialogue be filtered through the lens of Donna Haraway? Can we only re-enchant the world by namedropping Silvia Federici? Are we fated to always footnote white women in conversations on post-humanist discourse, even though the subject has always been central to Indigenous Place Thought and feminist activist acts performed by people of colour world over?

In her interview with Marta Papini published in the catalogue, Alemani’s primary intellectual references are resolutely white, while the parameters of her art historical interventions are stubbornly Euro-centric. Alemani’s concern with the communion between self and universe is arrived at from her interest in surrealism, and, from her interview, it would seem like indigenous knowledge is something to “tap” into, not centre in one’s scholarship. It’s difficult to synthesise the generously accommodating nature of Alemani’s edition of the Venice Art Biennale with its overwhelming majority of female, indigenous, and non-binary artists, all otherwise either marginalised or left out of art history books, with this uncritical, unapologetic centering of Western ontological systems of thought. One explanation comes from her honest inability to commit to using feminism, even as a label. When asked if she would call the exhibition feminist, Alemani says, “... if by feminism you mean an approach to the world that emphasises connections and interdependencies, then yes, it’s a feminist show. But then, once again—shouldn’t we be asking whether all the previous editions were ‘masculinist’.” It doesn’t come across as the response of someone who might have either read or metabolised the writings of Sara Ahmed, who insists that feminism is more life practice than ideology.

It returned me to the question not just of who gets to do theory, but whose theory gets validated, propagated, and even appropriated, and by whom. I am reminded of the Métis scholar, Zoe Todd’s feeling of betrayal when listening to a lecture by Bruno Latour, upon realising that he was essentially peddling the values that had been historically present in Inuit thought, with little acknowledgement of provenance. While the art biennale derives its expansive quality from the inclusion of artists historically marginalised, it still performs an erasure at the level of its scholarship, with even the catalogue enabling this epistemic violence, including voices like Silvia Rivera Cusicanqui in a manner that feels tokenist and

not quite organic. I hold the lifework of feminist thinkers like Donna Haraway, Silvia Federici, and Rosi Braidotti in high esteem, but felt angered, nonetheless, by the absence of theoretical contributions from BIPOC feminists, a failing also hinted at in the poet Quinn Latimer’s review of the Biennale for Art Agenda: “Indeed, the show’s contextualizing of bodily metamorphosis, hybridity, and human-nonhuman relations with the earth in their most exclusively Eurocentric guises—Surrealism, Donna Haraway, et cetera—is disappointing. The historical capsules, though excellent, underline this Eurocentric historiography, in a sense, even if the curatorial selection of artists in the larger exhibition expertly rebuts it.”

It is a pity to have to nitpick what is doubtless a visual and imaginative feast. Yet, reflecting, in retrospect, on the menu, I felt like Lucia, the previous owner of the catalogue from the 24th International Art Exhibition of 1948—the first art Biennale staged after the defeat of fascism in Italy—that Alemanni bought online some years ago that was studded with her comments and reflections. Among her marginalia was this query, “Where are the women?” Mine reads, “Where are the BIPOC theorists?”



Cecilia Alemanni, Curator, Venice Art Biennale 2022. *Image: Courtesy of La Biennale di Venezia*

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4qu9s3cIiZc>

Venice Art Biennale 2022 - Special Preview

Video: Courtesy of La Biennale di Venezia

The 59th International Art Exhibition of La Biennale di Venezia, titled *The Milk of Dreams* is open to the public from April 23-November 27, 2022, at the Giardini and the Arsenale, Venice.

Illustrations



Figure 1: Jean-Baptiste-Siméon Chardin, *Soap Bubbles*, oil on canvas, approx. 1733–34, 93 x 74.6 cm (courtesy of National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C., Gift of Mrs. John W. Simpson, 1942.5.1)



Figure 2: Hubert Robert, *The Pantheon with the Port of Ripetta*, 1766, oil on canvas, 177 x 145 cm (courtesy of Beaux-Arts de Paris, Dist. RMN-Grand Palais / Art Resource, NY/National Gallery of Art)



Figure 3: James McNeill Whistler, *Symphony in White No. 1: The White Girl*, 1861-1863, 1872, oil on canvas (Harris Whittemore Collection, 1943.6.2, courtesy of National Gallery of Art)



Figure 4: Edouard Manet, *Le déjeuner sur l'herbe*, 1863, oil on canvas, 207 x 265 cm. (Musée d'Orsay, Donation Etienne Moreau-Nélaton 1906, courtesy of RMN-Grand Palais (Musée d'Orsay), Benoît Touchard, Mathieu Rabeau)



Figure 5: Joseph Mallord William Turner, *Norham Castle, Sunrise*, 1845, oil on canvas, 106 x 137 cm (Courtesy of Tate Britain, Image released under Creative Commons CC BY-NC-ND 4.0 DEED)



Figure 6: Laura Grisi, *Sunset Light*, 1967, neon, plexiglass, steel, 219 x 30 x 30 cm (courtesy of Laura Grisi Estate and the Venice Biennial)

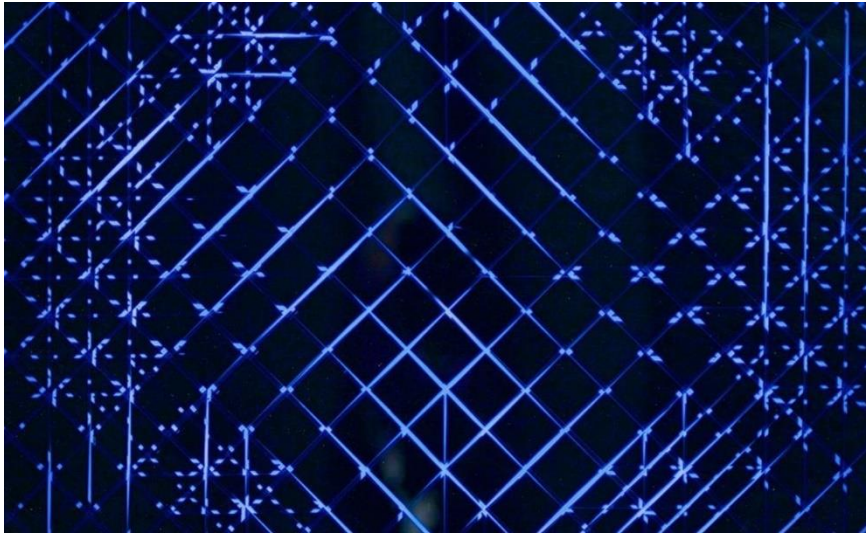


Figure 7: Grazia Varisco, *Schema Luminoso Variabile R. VOD. LAB.*, 1964. Kinetic light object, black wooden box, blue Perspex (methacrylate), electric motor 3/2 rpm, neon lamp, 91 x 91 x 12.5 cm. (photo by Thomas Libiszewski, collection of the artist, courtesy the Artist and Archivio Varisco)



Figure 8: Georgiana Houghton, *The Flower of William Stringer*, 1866, watercolour on paper, print on mount board, two pages, 49 x 42 x 3.5 cm (album) (collection of The College of Psychic Studies, London, courtesy of The College of Psychic Studies, London and the Venice Biennial)

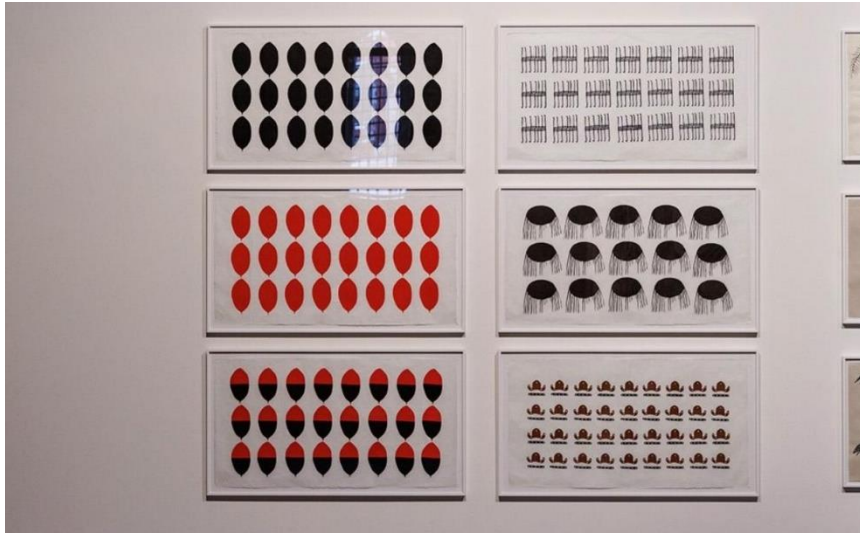


Figure 9: Sheroanawe Hakihiwe, monoprints on mulberry paper, installation view (courtesy of the artist and the Venice Biennale)



Figure 10: Simone Leigh, *Brick House*, 2019, bronze sculpture, 490 x 270 cm, installation view (courtesy of the Venice Biennial)



Figure 11: Meret Oppenheim, *Object*, 1936, Fur-covered cup, saucer, and spoon, Cup 10,9 cm in diameter; saucer 23,7 cm in diameter; spoon 20,2 cm long, overall height 7,3 cm, (Object Number 130.1946.a-c, courtesy of MoMA, copyright 2023 Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York / Pro Litteris, Zurich)



Figure 12: Cosima von Bonin, *WHAT IF THEY BARK 01-08*, 2022, 4 large mackerals, 2 small mackerals, 2 sharks with rockets, 190 x 130 x 120 cm, installation view detail (courtesy of the Venice Biennial)



Figure 13: Zheng Bo, *Le Sacre du Printemps (Tandvärkstallen)*, 2021-2022, video, 4k, colour, sound, 16 min. (courtesy of the artist)

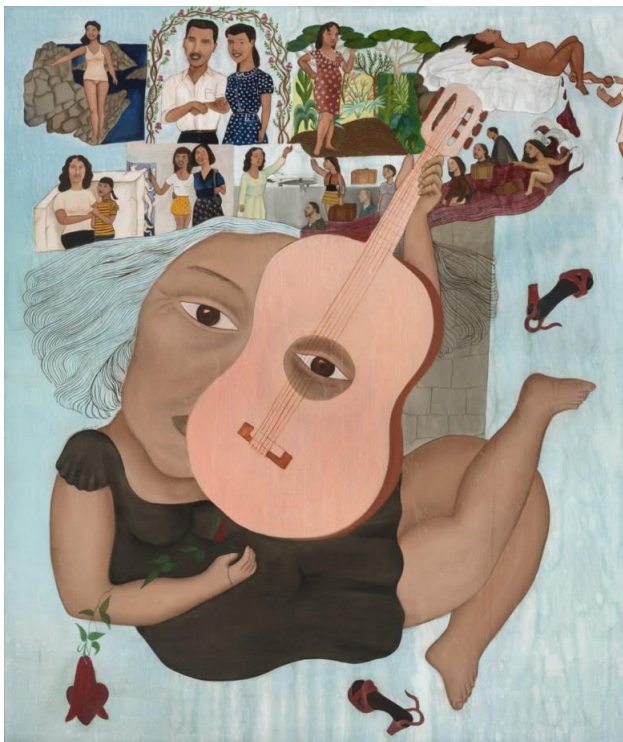


Figure 14: *Bendígame Mamita*, 1977, oil on canvas, 139,7 x 119,38 cm (courtesy of the artist and Lehmann Maupin, New York, Hong Kong, Seoul, and London)

Illustrations Credits

Figure 1: Downloaded May 5, 2024

[https://www.britannica.com/biography/Jean-Baptiste-Simeon-Chardin.](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Jean-Baptiste-Simeon-Chardin)

Figure 2: Downloaded May 5, 2024

[https://www.washingtonpost.com/entertainment/museums/a-painter-for-the-dont-go-there-live-there-crowd/2016/06/27/d20b9f12-394f-11e6-8f7c-d4c723a2becb_story.html.](https://www.washingtonpost.com/entertainment/museums/a-painter-for-the-dont-go-there-live-there-crowd/2016/06/27/d20b9f12-394f-11e6-8f7c-d4c723a2becb_story.html)

Figure 3: Downloaded April 20, 2024

[https://www.nga.gov/collection/highlights/whistler-symphony-in-white-no-1-the-white-girl.html.](https://www.nga.gov/collection/highlights/whistler-symphony-in-white-no-1-the-white-girl.html)

Figure 4: Downloaded April 20, 2024

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Figure 5: Downloaded June 10, 2024.

[https://www.tate.org.uk/art/artworks/turner-norham-castle-sunrise-n01981.](https://www.tate.org.uk/art/artworks/turner-norham-castle-sunrise-n01981)

Figure 6: Downloaded May 5, 2024

[https://www.labiennale.org/en/art/2022/technologies-enchantment/laura-grisi.](https://www.labiennale.org/en/art/2022/technologies-enchantment/laura-grisi)

Figure 7: Downloaded May 5, 2024

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Figure 8: Downloaded May 5, 2024

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Figure 9: Downloaded May 5, 2024

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Figure 10: Downloaded April 20, 2024

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Figure 11: Downloaded April 20, 2024

[https://www.moma.org/collection/works/80997.](https://www.moma.org/collection/works/80997)

Figure 12: Downloaded April 20, 2024

[https://www.labiennale.org/en/art/2022/milk-dreams/cosima-von-bonin.](https://www.labiennale.org/en/art/2022/milk-dreams/cosima-von-bonin)

Figure 13: Downloaded April 20, 2024

[https://zhengbo.org/2022_SP1.html.](https://zhengbo.org/2022_SP1.html)

Figure 14: Downloaded April 20, 2024

[https://hyperallergic.com/740790/cecilia-vicuna-sees-venice-through-her-mothers-eyes/.](https://hyperallergic.com/740790/cecilia-vicuna-sees-venice-through-her-mothers-eyes/)

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