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A Slovenian Biennial that Breaks the Mold

Heroic risk is evident in the Slovenian organization of the 32nd Biennial of Graphic Arts, which goes so far as to adopt the chance-based exquisite cadaver game as a model.



Joseph Nechvatal | 47 minutes ago



Jelsen Lee Innocent, "As If Our Bodies Were Built To House Your Bullets" (2017) digital print installation

LJUBLJANA, Slovenia — This summer has seen a European procession of art behemoths — Art Basel, Venice Biennale, Documenta and Sculpture Projects Münster — a mammoth confluence that happens only once a decade. Challenging the selection protocols of the art system behind these emporia is the satisfyingly lean, poetically charged, curatorially radical, and venerable (it was founded in 1955) 32nd Biennial of Graphic Arts: *Birth as Criterion*, in Ljubljana (pronounced: *loo-be-yana*) Slovenia. There, I came upon a heterogeneous assortment of gripping graphic art frequently focused on identity politics as auto-curated by diverse artists whose work thematically deals with issues of multiplicity. This organization and theme is the result of an interesting curatorial experiment spearheaded by chief-curator Nevenka Šivavec.

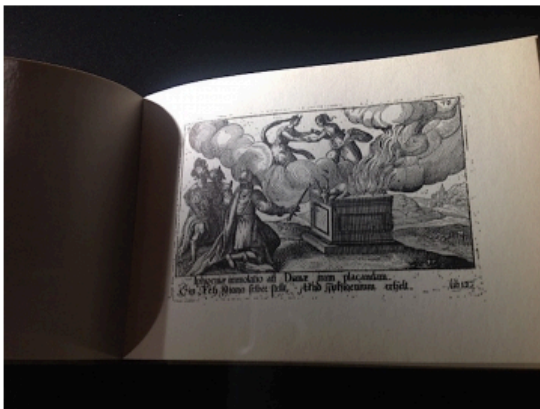
More than two-thirds of the work is by North and South Americans, and most of this focuses on identity politics and autobiography, which runs the risk of falling into self-involved parochialisms. Worse, such default identity fixations may even be used to fortify those opposed to the ideal of a world without division: bigoted far-right xenophobes and rabid nationalists. But here in EU-member Slovenia, within the continental climes of folkloric Ljubljana (a petite municipality near Venice on an alluvial plain dating to the Quaternary era), the Americans' art took on oddly gallant, almost fairy tale qualities of transcontinental value.



Performance still from Meta Grgurevič's "Silenzio: Eternal loopholes and braided lines" (2017) MGLC (photo by Urska Boljkovac)

Certainly, heroic risk is evident in the Slovenian organization of this biennial, which goes so far as to adopt the chance-based *cadavre exquis* (exquisite cadaver) as a model. Nevenka Šivavec and her eight curatorial team members (Irena Borić, Miklavž Komelj, Yasmín Martín Vodopivec, Breda Škrjanec, Lili Šturm, Vladimir Vidmar, Asta Vrečko and Božidar Zrinski) were bold enough to reconsider and change the generic protocols of curating a typical biennial. Instead of centralizing choice of participation by having one person (The Curator) determining the process for the realization of the exhibition, this collective functioned as a catalyst: setting up a curatorial mechanism that intertwined with the philosophical concept of the rhizome as developed by Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari (itself based on the botanical rhizome). The biennial collective thus embarked upon an uncertain and uneasy path where the only foundation was its determination to follow the initial convictions.

The collective kicked off the selection process by inviting five previous biennial awardees to name the first five participating artists, thus launching a generative structure in which further selected artists also become selectors. This ideal of flowing concatenation was formally emphasized in the lush, demanding opening dance performance: Meta Grgurevič's "Silenzio: Eternal Loopholes and Braided Lines." The piece interlinked electronic and ritualistic live music and chant with a stringed mechanical kinetic apparatus and mesmerizing dance choreographed by Sanja Nešković Peršin that blended ballet and contact improvisation.



Publius Ovidius Naso, *Metamorphoses*, published 1680 by J. W. Valvasor, (photo by the author)

The main exhibition, entitled *Criterion as Birth*, consists of 27 artists in spaces they largely chose for themselves at the MGLC Tivoli Mansion and at the newly renovated Švicarija Creative Centre. Setting the historic-conceptual-poetic context for the work of these 27 artists is a small but important show at Škuc Gallery entitled *This Is Not a Name*. Key referential works here include a beautiful rare book of Publius Ovidius Naso's *Metamorphoses* published by J.

W. Valvasor in 1680, Karel Destovnik Kajuh's cyclostyle-printed *Poem* (1943) from the Slovene National Archive, a copy of Tomaž Šalamun's first edition poem "Namen Pelerine" (Purpose of a Cape) from 1968, and an anonymous sculpture of the head of Achelous, a man-faced bull god, from 37–68 AD courtesy of the Museum of Ljubljana. This robust Greek mythological god of rivers and marshlands is often depicted as a mature bearded man with horns. In his battle with Hercules over a nymph, he is transformed into a bull (to no avail, alas). Figures of Achelous are often found in Roman settlements near rivers and marshes, such as Emona, the Roman town which preceded today's Ljubljana on the same site.

For *Birth as Criterion*, the recipients of the Grand Prize of the past five Biennial editions — Jeon Joonho (2007), Justseeds (2009), Regina José Galindo (2011), María Elena González (2013) and Ištvan Išt Huzjan (2015) — were invited to each propose one artist to participate in this year's event. The resulting five artists were then invited to nominate the next five. The process consisted of several rounds, a procedure that transformed not only the art content but also the biennial's structure, resulting in a 57% male to 43% female participation ratio. Šivavec seemed pleased with the results of these shared contacts, but told me this year's venture did not signal a permanent change in curatorial practise for the Biennial of Graphic Arts going forward.



Jess X Snow "Unstoppable by Borders" (2017) digital print wallpaper on wall (photo by the author for Hyperallergic)

This year's non-hierarchical sharing of power is also echoed in its title *Birth as Criterion*, which alludes to the poem of modernist twentieth-century Slovene poet Jure Detela that was provided to each artist. As I understand it, Detela's anti-anthropomorphic poetic philosophy is a predecessor of the recent speculative realism turn in continental philosophy and aesthetics that defines itself loosely by its stance against the dominant forms of post-Kantian philosophy a.k.a. correlationism. So even as the 32nd Biennial of Graphic Arts rejected the framework of a thematic exhibition, it clings to an important (if vaguely defined) philosophic-poetic attitude that questions the anthropomorphic polarity of human vs. non-human by offering a multitude of potential connections and interactions as a means of rearticulating the question of the conditions of humanist-centric art. Speculative realism, like Detela's poem, attempts to consider art, politics, nature, and thought beyond the confines of human finitude.

Just a few of my favorite individual contributions to this media-diverse show include Christopher Myer's "Detritus of Dreams" (2016), an installation of delicately hung embroideries that traffic in the surreal turns of phrases found in contemporary hip-hop music, made in collaboration with a group of Vietnamese embroiderers.



Wild whimsy is also apparent in [Kaitlynn Redell's](#) installation of works from her series *Supporting as Herself* in which she explores how film stills of [Anna May Wong](#) (the 1920s Chinese-American actress) carry a sense of historical weight for her, and serve as a contested foundation for Chinese American identity politics. As she explained to me, "the manipulated representation of Wong's public image, the stereotypical roles she played, and my proximity to her birthplace in Chinatown, Los Angeles," compelled Redell to view and interpret Wong "as a lynch pin for what it means to be both American and foreign 'othered' simultaneously." This serious matter is transmitted through joyful (almost dizzying) baroque figurative collages and drawings that depict twists and turns of flotsam and jetsam: fragments of Wong's hair, muscle fragments and/or body-hugging clothing. The rendering is meticulous and realistic, but ambiguous, in a liberating way.



Kaitlynn Redell "Supporting as Herself (Unknown 1)" (2013), courtesy of the artist

Japanese-American artist [Asuka Ohsawa's](#) installation "Inventory of a Life in Progress" (2017) was grid-oriented: made up of a bevy of colorful, charming screen-print and letterpress cards that visitors may take away with them in exchange for leaving a note on what makes their lives worth living. Grappling with grief over the loss of her father to cancer in 2016, Ohsawa drew inspiration for the vibrant grid from the last letter her father had written. The pop images on the postcards were gleaned from travel to Ohsawa's childhood home in Japan where she dug through boxes of remnants from her past. Her exchange project's emphasis on time and worth and

gladness made for a joyful and thoughtful pause, complimented by a chair where one may rest one's feet.



Asuka Ohsawa, "Inventory of a Life in Progress" (2017)
(detail) screen-print & letterpress (courtesy of the artist)

Norwegian artist [Johanne Teigen](#)'s installation "Light not Heat" (2017) filled a room with huge, shiny digital prints on fabric. She loosely bunched some of them on the wall in an informal manner that brought back memories of my artist friend [Steve Parrino](#)'s work. [Alberto Rodríguez Collía](#)'s "Jus ad Bellum" room installation (2015–17) was also good, mixing the virtual with the actual by sculpting flat, silver gun images that had been plucked from a first-person-shooter video game, sprinkling them around the room. [Jess X. Snow](#), a self-identified queer Asian-American artist, filmmaker and poet, astonished me with a digital wallpaper mural called "Unstoppable by Borders" (2017) of flat fleeing immigrants integrated into a flock of birds. It is

stunning, well makes the point of the artificiality of national borders, and made me want to see her poetic animation work "[Migration Is Natural](#)" (2017). The other wonderful wall-mural here was made by [Ebecho Muslimova](#). It clownishly depicts an auto-erotic masturbation machine powered by the sun and rain pleasuring her corpulent alter-ego FatEbe. By jumping into the wacky pataphysical tradition of drawn Rube Goldberg machines, the comic, exceedingly complex devices that perform simple tasks in very indirect and convoluted ways, it nicely picks up the generative automatism at the heart of this biennial. The mural's title comes from a line of [Jure Detela](#)'s hermetic poem: "How the Sensuality in Me Scatters" (2017) even though it appeared to me that sensuality was being collected. It is monumentally naughty and I loved it.



Ebecho Muslimova, "How the Sensuality in Me Scatters" (2017) sketch for wall mural, (courtesy of the artist)

Jelsen Lee Innocent's powerful installation "Pickets of Purpose for The People of Perpetual Protest II" (2017) imagines a stark tradition where elder black Americans have handed down their picket signs from generation to generation as a rite of passage and a sign of ethical stagnation. It makes a pertinent and necessary point, but his delicately constructed piece on police brutality "As If Our Bodies Were Built To House Your Bullets" (2017) is even more emotionally devastating. The numerous round graphic puncture holes that riddle the two images of magnified dark human skin (produced by the artist by photocopying the back of his hand and scaling it up to the pixelated realm) hanging loose over an elegant metal structure that makes them look like beach towels, are a punch to the gut. It effectively mixes violence with delicacy — and thus encourages empathy. It could be a defining work of art of our current time where Black Lives Matters still very much matters. (On the night of the opening a Latino Minnesota police officer, Jeronimo Yanez, was acquitted of manslaughter for the fatal shooting of Philando Castile, a 32-year-old black motorist, shot dead seconds after informing Yanez that he was carrying a gun.)

Also founded in a history of blackness in the US was the performance and resultant expressionistic paintings by Jarrett Key. He creates them by flamboyantly dancing against a hung canvas with black tempera paint soaked into his robust (brush-like) ponytail straightened with a hot comb. Imagine Bob Fosse choreographing an homage to Nam June Paik's "Performing La Monte Young's 'Composition 1960 No. 10' to Bob Morris (Zen for Head)" (1962). But Key told me that the work "examines tensions found at the intersection of the four pillars of his identity: blackness, queerness, southernness, and family." It does so in a highly entertaining and deeply personal way that exudes love and respect for his Georgia grandmother Ruth Mae "Poke-A-Dot" "Ma'Dear" Giles.



Jarrett Key performing "Hair Painting 15" (2017) (MGLC photo by Urska Boljkovac)

Another successful homage, this time to artist [Dieter Roth](#), is [Jennifer Schmidt's](#) poetry monotype print installation "Reviewing the Review, Everything for Review" (2017) that uses offset printing on newspaper and was executed at Seydisfjörður, Iceland using Dieter Roth's own etching press. As she explained to me, "the word play of the titles refers to the work of Dieter Roth, and his inclusive publication *Review for Everything* where every artist submission was accepted without jury." Schmidt drew the monotype multiples using her finger in black ink and ran the plates through Roth's old press to refer to his collaborative artistic process involving his friends and children and questioning the role of the singular artist. She also spent a lot of time in Roth's Icelandic studio holding and studying original copies of his [artist books](#) while dwelling on the concept of analogy. Indeed, her resultant poetry prints *are* analogies, invoking relationships between things, allowing reflection on how meaning is produced by comparing and understanding relationships between things.

At the [Ljubljana City Art Museum](#), I also took in the quirky, body-based work of [Ištvan Išt Huzjan](#), the winner of the Grand Prize of the 31st Biennial, in his show *Measures*, smartly curated by Alenka Gregorič. Gregorič first lays out various

projects tied to the artist walking, a constant in Huzjan's questioning of social systems, historical facts, and relationships between individuals. Exhibited on the second floor are objects made in the artist's studio, where we see the enjoyable play with basic physical things and properties enhanced by the fragility of materials used.

Nearby, and also of major interest to me, was Brazilian [Maria Bonomi's](#) impressive print retrospective *Printmaking for Ever* at the [Jakopič Gallery](#). I vividly recall the rugged feel of clasping the hard-working artisanal hand of Bonomi upon meeting her. Her woodblock prints are large, abstract, and powerfully expressive — yet they convey the feeling of fragility. In masterful woodcut prints, such as "Ballad of Terror" (1975), she contrasts bold, abstract (but symbolic) images with pale, thin, rice paper so that nervy color inks may filter through. This sizeable blood-hot print, made the same year



Maria Bonomi, "Ballad of Terror" (1975) woodcut, MGLC (photo by Željko Stevanić, IFP)

that Bonomi was jailed for two days for suspicion of insurgency, expresses the pain of torture one of Bonomi's friends experienced under Brazilian dictatorship in the 1970s.



Leja Jurišić, "The Most Beautiful Moments are the Shortest" (2017), (photo by the author)

I also took in the dramatic moment when [Leja Jurišić](#) kicked away the chair in her “The Most Beautiful Moments are the Shortest” (2017) presentation at the Ministry of Culture building, leaving herself, angelic-like, taped to the wall. With this work she accomplished an appropriation-transgression of Maurizio Cattelan’s “A Perfect Day” (1999) piece by performing it as an anti-masochistic escape act; arduously working her way free of the self-imposed tape trap.

So as you might glean, there is a lot included here of worth, but not so much that it can’t be seen in a full day. On the other hand, the idea of challenging petrified art world hierarchies and protocols of exclusion with active contemplation never ends.

The 32nd Biennial of Graphic Arts: Birth as Criterion continues in Ljubljana Slovenia till October 29th at the MGLC Tivoli Mansion, the Švicarija Creative Centre, Škuc Gallery, the Ljubljana City Art Museum and Jakopič Gallery.

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