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13th Biennale de Lyon

VARIOUS VENUES

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Mike Nelson, *A7 (Route du soleil)*, 2015, tires, iron, concrete. Installation view, La Sucrière. Photo: Blaise Adilon.

IN HIS CATALOGUE ESSAY for “*La vie moderne*,” the thirteenth edition of the Biennale de Lyon, curator Ralph Rugoff points out one of modernism’s most enduring paradoxes: If the desire for rupture is, as he puts it, “the modernist gesture par excellence,” then the urge to break free from the modern era is “merely a symptom of the modernity it aspires to bury.” Modernism, in other words, is very much with us still—whether we admit it or not. Indeed, as Rugoff argues, its myriad impulses and effects continue to thread their way through contemporary culture in complex and contradictory ways. To take *the modern* as a biennial theme is certainly a tall order. An impossibly loaded term, it describes the present, conjures multiple pasts (as far back as the Stone Age, as biennial director Thierry Raspail notes in the catalogue), and launches toward the future. Embracing these ambiguities rather than skirting them, Rugoff’s show looks both backward and forward, focusing on the uncertainties and pluralities that define modern life.

Mainly housed in two venues on opposite sides of the Rhône River—the Musée d’Art Contemporain de Lyon (MAC Lyon), designed by Renzo Piano, and La Sucrière, a sugar warehouse from the 1930s whose vast industrial shed and silos were reclaimed as an exhibition space in 2003—this year’s biennial feels especially self-referential. A retrospective exhibition spanning various venues across Lyon displays works acquired by MAC Lyon from past editions of the biennial. Couching the biennial’s twenty-two-year history as a “genealogy of modern,” this satellite show corroborates Rugoff’s forward/backward understanding of modernity. Meanwhile, some of the most memorable works at MAC Lyon and La Sucrière are commissions inspired by Lyon itself.

One such piece, *The Unmanned (1834—La Memoire de Masse)*, 2015, by French collaborators Fabien Giraud and Raphaël Siboni, is set in Lyon during the Industrial Revolution. Close-ups of unmanned automated looms intercut with a violent stampede allude to an 1834 revolt by Lyonnais weavers spurred, in part, by the adoption of mechanical Jacquard looms, which required fewer workers. With shots of the replaceable perforated cards that enable this machinery, Giraud and Siboni prompt us to recall the afterlife of this innovation: Punch cards are an important precursor to computer programming. In another nod to Lyon’s bygone textile industry, Turkish artist Ahmet Ögüt’s multimedia installation uses sewing machines to spool film, a medium that also has deep roots in the city. Shooting during a 2015 reenactment of the Lumière brothers’ 1895 *Workers Leaving the Lumière Factory in Lyon*—widely considered the first motion picture—Ögüt filmed people walking out of the same factory building (now part of the Institut Lumière) holding signs emblazoned with logos of recently shuttered local businesses. Like *The Unmanned*, Ögüt’s installation draws a connection between the labor unrest of the

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industrial era and the disenfranchising effects of today's computerization, outsourcing, and corporate sprawl.

More humorous (if uncomfortably so), a video portrait of contemporary Lyon by Jeremy Deller and Cecilia Bengolea attempts to highlight a sociocultural divide employing the style and language of hip-hop videos. *Rhythmasspoetry*, 2015, the artists' first collaboration, stars the elderly ex-president of Lyon's tourist bureau, Denis Trouxe, and dancers from an East Lyon club. While Trouxe awkwardly raps lyrics written by Bengolea and himself and shows off his expensive suburban home ("I'm Denis, a white man from Champagne. . . . I love street art, the margins, dancehall, werk"), a group of scantily clad and much younger black women bump and grind. Describing the dancers as "bewitching sorceresses," Trouxe assures the viewer that the "girls from Vaulx-en-Velin" (a poor suburb of Lyon with high unemployment) are "with him." Elsewhere in the biennial, similar class disparities receive less glib treatment. George Osodi's photographs of his native Nigeria contrast royalty in robes and jewels ("Nigeria Monarchs," all works on view 2012) with dilapidated shacks amid fields of garbage (*Waterfronts*, 2015). As Robert Smithson succinctly put it in 1973: "The opposite of waste is luxury. Both waste and luxury tend to be useless."

One of several artists who has brought actual trash into the biennial, Mike Nelson created *A7 (Route du soleil)*, 2015, a display of blown-out tires collected from the A7 highway, which runs through Lyon. Reprising an installation of tire scraps found along a Birmingham motorway (*M6*, 2013), Nelson's local finds send acrid air wafting through La Sucrière. Treating the same subject, Ed Ruscha's hyperrealistic paintings ("Gators," 2014) on view at MAC Lyon underscore the abstract appeal of splayed and frayed tires. Other artists' evocations of trash more directly address issues such as unemployment, poverty, and the environment. Yto Barrada's photo series "Plumber Assemblage," 2014, depicts pleasingly awkward bric-a-bracs of pipes, showerheads, and faucets made by plumbers as they wait for work at the souk in Tangier. Inviting a similar (though troubling) aesthetic contemplation of quotidian assemblage, Andreas Lolis presents *Permanent Residence*, 2014–15, a trompe l'oeil marble carving of a tenderly constructed cardboard-and-Styrofoam hovel from a sidewalk encampment. The myth of a postindustrial, postmodern world of immaterial networks is hereby refuted with the stubbornly physical remains of an earlier modern era's decaying infrastructure. (Taking the biennial itself to task for the waste it produces, Taiwanese artist Lai Chih-Sheng has filled an entire room at MAC Lyon with detritus accumulated during the show's installation.)

Industrial modernity also ushered in the most massive human impact on the natural world ever seen—and the advent of ecological crisis. Fittingly, many of the works in the biennial grapple with nature in a near-Romantic sense, as an utterly uncontrollable force of sublimity and terror that both conflicts with and parallels forces of modernity and technological progress. Among the works simulating nature is Cyprien Gaillard's trippy 3-D projection of trees and shrubbery undulating like ravers in depressed urban landscapes (*Nightlife*, 2015) and Michel Blazy's living sculptures featuring seedlings growing out of the mundane accoutrements of contemporary life: a ruined iMac G3 and a Canon PowerShot digital camera, Nike and Converse sneakers, and a pair of Marshall headphones (*Pull Over Time*, 2015). Channeling the Romantics' admiration for overgrown and decaying classical monuments, Blazy sticks it to planned obsolescence, presenting our consumer culture in glorious ruination. Whereas Blazy shows technology overpowered by vegetal creep, Hicham Berrada takes the opposite route, presenting large-scale, artificially lit terrariums that coerce fragrant night-blooming jasmine to open during the day for the olfactory pleasure of biennial visitors (*Mesk-ellil*, 2015).

Amid moments of bloated spectacle—the worst offender being Simon Denny's installation showcasing the inventory of personal property (luxury cars, Jet Skis, artworks) seized from Megaupload creator Kim Dotcom's mansion at the time of his arrest in 2012—it is the biennial's simplest interventions that ring truest. Among these, Kader Attia's *Traditional Repair, Immaterial Injury*, 2014, is almost missably subtle. Using staples to crudely patch cracks in the floor of La Sucrière, the French-Algerian artist visualizes unhealed sociopolitical wounds. Refusing the clean break of modernity, Attia shows the tabula rasa to be a myth. Instead, his work suggests, horrors from the past (slavery, colonialism, genocide) are irreparable and enduring. The Frankensteinian sutures that viewers walk over—cognizant of them or not—are reminders of the scarred bedrock of our own era.

The Thirteenth Biennale de Lyon is on view through Jan. 3, 2016.

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