

collaboration, cohesion, discussion. People were not afraid to work with one another's ideas and take them further, or to advance others' careers. I find that in Europe one hundred percent. Get-togethers are not as formal; events and dinners aren't "sponsored." Although I was frightened when I realized there's no production support in Europe for nonresident artists. You have to wiggle it out of your means here in the United States, and *then* the galleries will sell it once it's produced.

EW: This renewed attention to your work also gets back to frequent comments that you've been a filmmaker and artist ahead of her time. You've always taken technology as a medium and subject in your work, and technology has changed a lot since you started working in the 1970s, yet you've retained a remarkable degree of aesthetic and conceptual continuity, because you're speaking about it in the abstract—working with celluloid to talk about virtual reality.

EB: My original interest in technology was particularly about women's roles in the workplace, and about the relationship between work and play. It evolved from studying play, work behavior, and social conformity. I became interested in technology in the early 1980s when I realized that robots were replacing people in production. For instance a technology takeover structures *Cinderella* (1986). The film starts in the first factory, a Forge, then evolves into something very similar to what we have now, where everything is reproduced from information—but that was 1986. When I was making *Cinderella*, I was studying how interactive games were programmed. I structured the script as a set of hyperlinks; I was interested in interactive games but not in making a game product. *Hiatus* (1999/2015) developed immediately after *Cinderella*, when I went into what I called a hiatus, to do research at NASA Ames. It's 16mm film because in 1994 there wasn't any computer technology that could do what I wanted. CGI was just forming. I didn't want to get lost in farming out my work to other people, but I did want to make a complex piece.

EW: Right, you're very involved in all aspects of production.

EB: People didn't understand *Hiatus* when it came out in 1999. It was perceived as a

contradiction, because I was using analog film. I wanted it to be *about* interactive technology rather than *being* interactive technology. I never showed it again until younger curators wanted to screen it. Then I edited it for digital and as a dual-screen piece in 2015.

EW: Your work is rooted in rules, structures, and Structural film, but it's also very playful—it's about games. I love this playfulness, especially in the context of the (mostly male) Structural film being made when you were starting out.

EB: The main thing was putting the body back into film. Other women like Kathryn Bigelow and Lizzie Borden were also part of the experimental film world, but moved to Hollywood because the narrative experiments they were taking with character and context didn't find a New York audience at that time. I did a lot of personal research to ground my belief that the body can communicate through signs and gestures. In my films, anytime something can be expressed as an action rather than a word, I do it.

EW: In your earliest work, but not your later work, it's you performing. What changed?

EB: It was very practical. I wanted to get behind the camera. I didn't want to hire a cameraperson and have to translate my ideas. But I was also less confident then. I showed my work rather privately, in an incubator with other women artists like Julia Heyward, Joan Jonas, Dara Birnbaum.

EW: And later your peers start performing—like Mike Kelley and Ashley Bickerton. You also start taking on archetypes of women rather than your specific self.

EB: It was a conscious thing to switch from men to women. When I started, I was just thinking about performers as performers; it wasn't a gender issue. But it made sense to cast men playing games, because most of the figures you see in action are men.

EW: Your earlier work references architecture but still takes place in the black box. In *Switch Center* (2003) you left the black box for the first time, and made a film set in a Soviet building.

EB: Architecture is what I'm currently working on. *Switch Center* was shot mostly by

me with a Bolex camera in an empty building. Like an observational filmmaker, I responded directly to that space—its scale, sounds, and light. A Pokémon commercial was filmed the night before I got there, so I incorporated the Pokémon as part of my experience of that space. The driving question was, "What would happen if I could find the energy lines in architecture, and if I could perform them?" The circular movement was created by me animating around the rims of the water tanks; I responded to everything I saw as an architectural line with movement.

EW: So the physical structure structured your behavior, like rules in a game.

EB: Yes, and I played it. I designed the film based on the shapes of the spaces and the light moving through those spaces. That led me to the Harvard stadium [for *Tension Building* (2015)], the perfect place to see how to use a set of proportions and focus points. Engineers use a viewfinder that fixes their perspective point, and then they move around it and take measurements to find where they are in space. I did that on the stadium as an experiment. I held one view and just moved around it, animating the space.

EW: What should we look forward to at your summer Secession show?

EB: It's for Europe. I'm showing two films, and a room of drawings that haven't been shown before. One film is the installation *You the Better* (1983/2015), which includes eight fully animated houses that change colors but also become different things in the film. They line up way in the deep space to become the point of view of the main character when he starts to see the structure of the game. Then they become a scoreboard. I hold that piece very dear because it spatializes the film in a very special way. There's also a new version of *Tension Building*. I've updated it since the Trump election to bring out a critique of spectacle in American culture. *You the Better* features spectacle sports; the guys perform to a set of rules but miss the whole point of what they're doing. That idea of spectacle sports is enhanced in *Tension Building*, which gnaws at American culture and what we have become recently.

Il Mondo Magico: Italian Pavilion Venice Biennale

Cecilia Alemani interviewed by Wendy Vogel

Arsenale di Venezia, 30122, Venice, Italy
May 13–November 26
labiennale.org
ilmondomagico2017.it

WENDY VOGEL: This year's Italian Pavilion exhibition at the Venice Biennale is *Il mondo magico*, a title borrowed from the 1948 book by Ernesto de Martino. Your curatorial statement refers to de Martino's description of rituals as "devices through which individuals try to regain control in times of uncertainty and reassert their presence in the world." Can you explain how this theme resonates in our political climate?

CECILIA ALEMANI: *Il mondo magico* is the book that inaugurates de Martino's studies

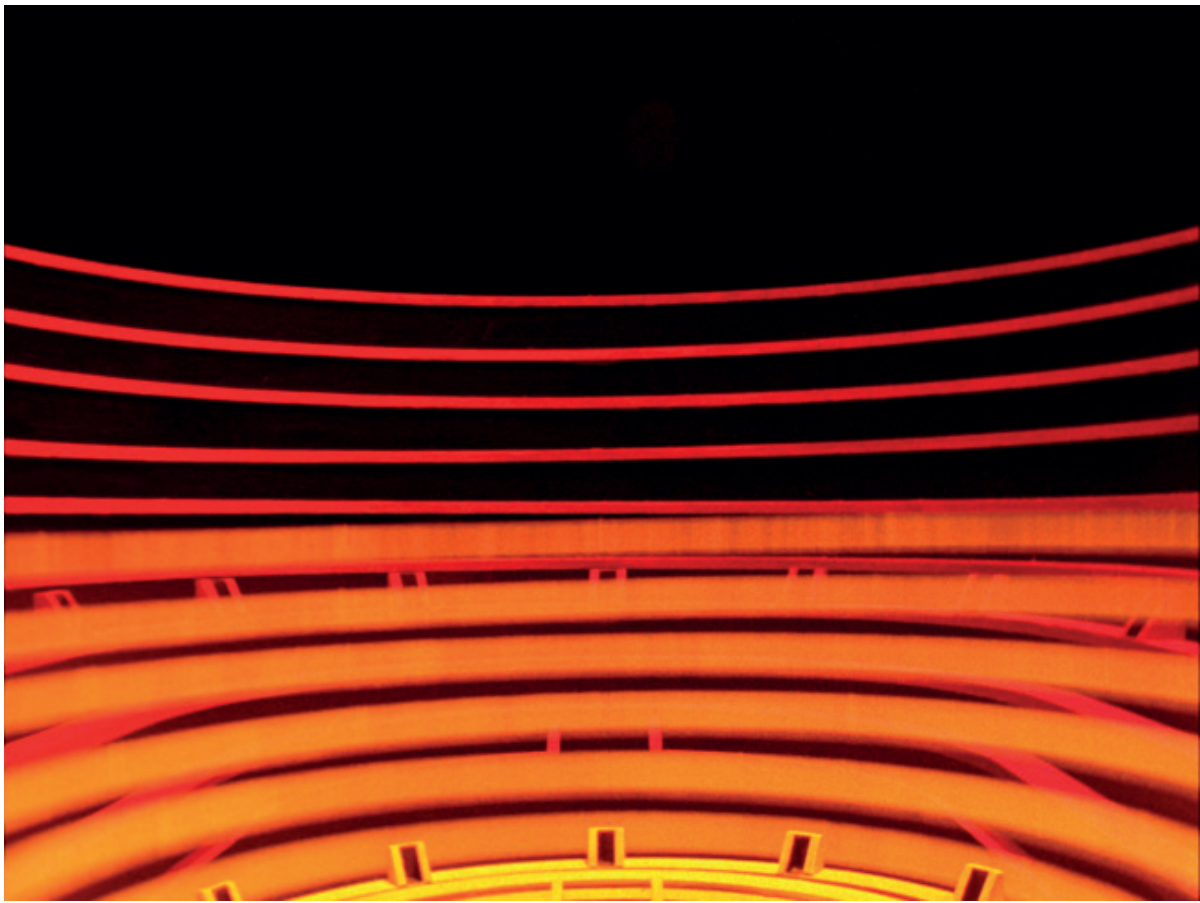
about the world of magic. He looks at ancient civilizations and their rituals, shamanic practices, mythologies, beliefs. After *Il mondo magico*, he keeps studying the theme of magic in the "Southern trilogy," which was published in the 1950s and 1960s. In these books, he examines Italy in a specific time culturally—the Second World War, when there was a sharp distinction between the north and the south. The north is associated with the economic boom and industry, while the south has been seen as the poor and the peasant region. De Martino goes on missions to study the magic world of these southern populations.

He looked to magic as a tool to reaffirm one's presence in the world, and not as an escape into an irrational world. I am struck by his role in giving voice to the populations of southern Italy, which at that moment were

seen as a second-class culture. I use this idea to frame the exhibition called *Il mondo magico*, which includes three artists whose work is embedded in research into rituals, as well as belief and faith in imagination. They use new mythologies as tools to rewrite history and to face a moment of crisis.

WV: Your curatorial text states that the exhibiting artists move away from documentary-style narratives. Do their methods resonate with the way de Martino worked?

CA: Yes, because de Martino's approach was quite experimental. He was using the methodology of anthropology, but instead of applying it to all cultures, he applied it to his own contemporary culture. His research was also incredibly interdisciplinary. He would travel with photographers like Franco Pinna,





who would document rituals like tarantism. He also brought an ethnomusicologist to record the southern population's voices, songs, and lamentations. Today, you could call his approach documentary, but it wasn't about recording from a passive standpoint.

WV: Why do you think the anti-documentary method is important now?

CA: I'm interested in facing themes and subjects that are still relevant today, but from a different entry point. You might say it is also a reaction to the last Biennale, curated by Okwui Enwezor, which was so much about straightforward documentary. I have great respect for Enwezor. One of the most amazing exhibitions, which brought me to what I do as a job, was his documenta in 2002. But that said, I like the idea of working with artists who can deal with the same themes, but from a more personal or alternative perspective. One clear example is Adelita Husni-Bey, who is the youngest artist in the exhibition. She works mainly with video. Husni-Bey tackles important subjects like the geopolitical crisis, but through the lens of imagination and utopia. She brings together groups of people in

intense workshops where they try to create a new cosmology or a new vision of the world.

WV: Why did you choose to work with only three artists?

CA: The decision to have only three artists is a radical departure from the previous Italian Pavilion exhibitions, which have included up to 150 artists. I wanted to distance myself from that approach and align the pavilion more with the other national pavilions, which usually bring only one artist. The exhibition will present a deep reading of these three artists' work. They will only show new work apiece, but each of them has a giant space. I hope that when you enter the pavilion, you will feel as though you have walked into the artists' minds.

Roberto Cuoghi will do a large sculptural installation. Adelita Husni-Bey is working on a new video that she shot in New York. And Giorgio Andreotta Calò will make an installation that is in deep dialogue with the pavilion's architecture.

WV: You write about the genealogy of a magic line in Italian art, from the Renaissance to the mysticism of Arte Povera to Transavanguardia

and beyond. How do these artists fit within that tradition?

CA: Even though the artists are young, their language is deeply influenced by the Italian tradition. I write about a magic line that can be seen in the Renaissance, with a polarity between rational mathematical studies and the discovery of alchemy and Hermeticism. And more recently, in Arte Povera, it can be seen in artists' use of alchemic materials. For instance, Andreotta Calò often adopts strategies that can be compared to those of Arte Povera by using environmental elements like water, fire, and light. His use of water as both a generative and a destructive force recalls not only Arte Povera, but also artists like Gordon Matta-Clark and Robert Smithson. In Cuoghi's work, you can also easily see this magic line. I thought about the artist as a shaman, and Cuoghi is a perfect example of that. Recently, at the Deste Foundation in Greece, he made a series of amazing crab sculptures. They look artisanal, but they are actually made with a 3D printer that prints clay. Then he fired the clay in archaic-looking kilns that he built himself. He combined a very advanced technology with an ancient one.

Miroslaw Balka: CROSSOVER/S

Text by Agnieszka Gracza

Pirelli HangarBicocca
Via Chiese 2, 20126 Milano, Italy
Through July 30
hangarbicocca.org

"The end is in the beginning and yet you go on," says Samuel Beckett. Placed at the outset and the close of Miroslaw Balka's retrospective at HangarBicocca, spanning the last three decades of the Polish artist's career, two yellow lines—one horizontal, one vertical—frame the exhibition and, taken together, beautifully illustrate the titular "crossovers." Both are fragile and unstable objects. To see the first, a video piece featuring a rectangular yellow bar shifting ever so slightly against a black background, visitors must look back or retrace their steps, suspended as it is high up, out of harm's way, above the main exhibition room's curtained threshold. (This casts the work's title, *Holding the Horizon* [2016], in an ironic light.) Equally elusive, the tenuous and barely visible thread of *Yellow Nerve* (2012-2015), spotlit at night and catching the sun's rays at certain hours of the day, occupies the full height of the contiguous Cube room. It has the empty industrial space all to itself, barring the audience members, whose breath and movements occasionally cause it to stir.

As they make (or, rather, feel) their way through an exhibition designed to stimulate all the senses, visitors individually and collectively give it body. Except in one instance—a blurry portrait of a concentration camp guard interviewed by Claude Lanzmann for his 1985 documentary film *Shoah* in Balka's three-second-long looped video work *Primitive* (2008)—the body as such is conspicuous by its absence. And yet its diffuse presence haunts the show, starting with the heavy velvet curtain visitors must negotiate on entering the exhibition space, which has been heated to reach the average temperature of the human body. Titles of other works, such as *15 x 22 x 19 (hard skull)* (2006) and *Yellow Nerve* (2012-2015), read like anatomical studies or else *memento mori*. According to his usual practice, the artist's own body—and

notably its height—has been used as a measure for the scaled-down version of the original zoo built for the SS officers and their families at the Treblinka extermination camp, the bare bones of which are faithfully reproduced in *250 x 700 x 455, ø 41 x 41 / Zoo / T* (2007/2008).

If man is the measure of all things, then some of the artworks on view are bound to confound our expectations. Take, for instance, the colossal *Wege zur Behandlung von Schmerzen* (2011), designed as if to dwarf the visitor. Styling itself as an "anti-fountain," the bulky metallic structure continually discharges a murky black liquid in lieu of the accustomed clear water; unlike your typical fountain, which tends to stand in the middle of a public square, it has been relegated to a corner. The center of the main exhibition space, fittingly called Navate (the naves), is occupied instead by another sizable installation made of steel and titled *Cruzamento* (2007), in keeping with the Christian symbolism that pervades the show. Made up of intersecting cage-like corridors, fitted with five strategically positioned ventilators that make your hair stand on end as you walk through, this is one of several such passageways and conduits made to channel visitors' bodies or draw them inside, like a trap. Whereas *200 x 760 x 500 / The Right Path* (2008/2015), whose L-shaped layout mirrors that of the Navate as a whole, leads to a dead end, the lightbulb dangling from the ceiling of a wooden cubicle in *196 x 230 x 141* (2007) switches off, disconcertingly, the minute one crosses its bounds.

A number of the installation pieces brought together under one roof at HangarBicocca rely on visitors to activate them by walking through, into, or on top of them; others seem to act of their own accord. This applies to works of the noise-generating variety especially, above all the outsize heavy wooden platform of *400 x 250 x 30* (2005), calling for a delicate balancing act on the visitor's part akin to finding a sweet spot, and the wily *To Be* (2014), a motorized steel wire whose writhing motions produce a loud lashing sound, occasionally accompanied

by the hollow thud of the falling platform displayed nearby.

Overlaps such as these are reflected in the show's capacious title. *CROSSOVER/S* invites its audience to tease out the connecting threads among the unsettling objects gathered in this rich, densely allusive exhibition, in which differences of scale, verticality and horizontality, light and darkness, purity and dirt, heat and cold are subtly contrasted and played off against one another. Ultimately, the artworks assembled at HangarBicocca all seem to point in one direction: mortality as the true leveler and our common horizon, one we struggle to grasp.