

Marco Baravalle

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

Marco Baravalle

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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 inter-connectedness, 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:

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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 Orbits", "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, conflict-

ual, 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

Marco Baravalle is a member of S.a.L.E. Docks, a collective and an independent space for visual arts, activism, and experimental theatre located in what had been an abandoned salt storage facility in Dorsoduro, Venice, Italy. Founded in 2007, its programming includes activist group meetings, formal exhibitions, and screenings. He is a member of the IRI (Institute Of Radical Imagination), a think-tank inviting political scientists, economists, lawyers, architects, hackers, activists, artists, and cultural producers to share knowledge on a continuous base with the aim of defining and implementing zones of post-capitalism in Europe's South and the Mediterranean. From 2018 to 2022 Baravalle was research fellow at INCOMMON. In praise of community. Shared creativity in arts and politics in Italy (1959-1979), a project hosted by IUAV, University of Venice. He is the author of *L'autunno caldo del curatore. Arte, neoliberalismo, pandemia* (Marsilio, 2021). In 2021 he was awarded with a Fulbright Visiting Student Researcher grant at the CUNY Graduate Center in New York City.

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<https://www.machina-deriveapprodi.com/post/quando-la-fiction-capitalista-recita-il-genere>.

Notes

- [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.