

Biennale and Body

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'The Milk of Dreams'

Biennale Arte 2022. Venice

"Under the increasingly pervasive pressure of technology, the boundaries between bodies and objects have been utterly transformed, bringing about profound mutations that remap subjectivities, hierarchies, and anatomies."

Cecilia Alemani, 2022

(Fossa Margutti and Achenbach, 2022, p44)

Disobedient bodies are everywhere. The bodies that don't belong and can't conform. Glitching across normative society, visible, conspicuous, sharply contrasted to the dominant cultures. Refusal built into their very framework.

In *Glitch Feminism; A manifesto*, Legacy Russell posits that our "...failure to function within the confines of a society that fails us is a pointed and necessary refusal." (Russell, 2020 p11) In glitching we can "...claim our right to complexity, to range, within and beyond proverbial margins." (Russell, 2020, p22) They view the body as "inconceivably vast", as a "...world-building word, filled with potential, and...filled with movement." (Russell, 2020 p41) For Russell, "...bodies are not fixed points, they are not destinations. Bodies are Journeys...abstract." (Russell, 2020 p146)

Approaching *'The Milk of Dreams'* in a disobedient body, one recognises kith and kin in numerous works. Difference calls to difference, relationships between works, thoughts and experiences are mirrored in the diversity of the audiences that come to see them. Dynamics between the disobedient bodies and disobedient works provide intuitive sympathies and invigorate new dialogues with our surrounding world.



Figure 1 Installation view of Seduction of the Cyborg, Arsenale, 2022.

The discourse between national contributions has been curated in such a way that the complexity of interactions breed a generative interchange that does not privilege one system of making over another, actively encouraging “...reflection on how the history of art is constructed around museum and exhibition practices that establish hierarchies of taste and mechanisms of inclusion and exclusion.” (Fossa Margutti and Achenbach, 2022. p 46) This collection of disobedience emboldens disobedience of thought for the audience; in how we choose to construct meaning from the relationships between works according to our own experience.

The Biennale is, of course, not perfect: questions around who can afford to attend and who cannot abound; the issue of the climate impact of hundreds of thousands of visitors flying to the already sinking islands of Venice; the homogenising effect of globalisation on art; the art-washing practices of ethically questionable corporations and brands; the longevity of the artworks and the materials they are constructed from; these issues and many more tend to problematise the whole institution before you even look at the works in question.

However, despite these ever-present caveats to the potential of the international art festival, Cecilia Alemani’s curation of the Biennale has favoured a greater proportion of women and non-binary people, as well as indigenous artists, offering at least an ethical compromise.



Figure 2 Installation view of Gabriel Chaile at Arsenale, 2022.

Attempting to unpick the connections between the works, artists, curators and dominant theories is next to impossible. This amalgam, *The Milk of Dreams*, coalesces and creates tensions that cannot be traced chronologically. This is echoed by the intertwining nature of feminist practices that embrace a rich heritage of waves of thought, branching repeatedly, sculpted and fashioned into the necessary shape for the time in which they manifest. Equally, when we think about the disobedient body, we think singularly and with scrutiny. However, when disobedient bodies coalesce and collectivise, their disobedience becomes more difficult to pinpoint, manifesting temporary, contingent safe spaces through their alliances. These communities are not concrete but nebulous, formed through need, open to change.

If we consider the biennale itself, built of disparate pavilions, formed around two behemoth exhibitions in Giardini and Arsenale, there is a sense here, too, of disobedience. How is an audience expected to navigate the intricacies of all these works, across two major sites and countless collateral events, not to mention the community of galleries, studios and artists, each vying to co-opt the plethora of cultural tourists into their own orbit? This unwieldy body, interconnected through the central nervous system of the biennale, is one we cannot even begin to grasp an overview of, let alone master in a comprehensive manner. A beguiling body of work with refusal built into its very make-up, it refuses you the chance to master it, to know it, and as such retains its own agency.

This can easily be read as a negative consequence of an event of this scale, however, this vast collection of works insists that its audience create their own organising principle. We as viewers curate our own experience of the works, forming our own network of interest and connection, each experience a narrative of significance specific to its creator.

Given the complexities of The Milk of Dreams intentions, as a space in which myriad imaginings of the world are viewed through surrealism, post humanism, intersectional and eco-feminism, utopian and dystopian lenses alike, the cohesive collection of pieces does as it intends, it enriches and broadens the conversation around how we face our current situation, fears and concerns. Pulling together intersecting strands across science fiction, history, politics and environmentalism, each thread intensifies the capacity for exploration of the here and now. Highlighting the importance of complexity and its necessary murkiness that helps us to see the entangled web of our relationship to the world around us and how we are intensely connected, not objective observers at one remove as we often pretend.

The British Pavilion

***'Feeling Her Way'* Sonia Boyce**

From a national perspective, the British Pavilion selected Sonia Boyce to represent Great Britain. In addition to this, the British Council host a fellowship at the Venice Biennale for students of participating universities to embark on a month-long programme, working at the British Pavilion and receiving support for a project in return. Fellows take part in a three-month induction process over zoom, hearing from the artist, the curator, and the managers that support the programme in Venice. During their month at the biennale, the fellows develop relationships and trust with one another, across diversity of experience and culture, as well as assisting the public in the reception of Sonia Boyce's work.

'Feeling Her Way' by Sonia Boyce, curated by Emma Ridgeway, hosts a microcosm of British cultural diversity and is presented through the musical contributions of Black British women. Comprised of six rooms, the space is a layering of colour, sound and texture, as the voices of Jacqueline Dankworth, Poppy Ajudha, Sofia Jernberg and Tanita Tikaram, led by composer Errolyn Wallen, experiment, play, explore and interlace as you traverse the exhibition. Each vocal and visual piece loops at different times to the others and sounds bleed and co-mingle from adjoining rooms, weaving a rich tapestry of ever-changing sound.



Figure 3 Installation view of Sonia Boyce 'Feeling Her Way' 2022, British Pavilion

Pyrite inspired forms provoke a reflection of systems of value, as the “fools gold” structures support musical paraphernalia by Black British women that spans over 60 years, much of which sourced at charity shops and still bearing price tags, their value no longer held. Inversely, their appearance as part of the installation has changed their cultural value, placing them with care and delicacy to be reconsidered. The invaluable contribution to British culture and the soundtrack to many lives have been submitted by the public to Boyce. This “Devotional Collection” is the backbone of the whole exhibition, displayed on golden wallpaper designed by Boyce, 3D printed golden structures and glittering forms prop up the familiar items for visitors to peruse, exclaiming over forgotten favourites.

An experimental and joyful experience, the exhibition celebrates the contributions of Black women to British culture, encouraging playfulness and the practice of listening, call and response. However, the exhibition also leaves the audience space to unpick and interrogate appropriative value systems that simultaneously extract from Black British culture, whilst carefully overlooking those women’s contributions. As Errollyn Wallen leads Poppy, Jacqueline and Tanita in a sequence of vocal provocations, the noises and exclamations become wilder and stranger, disobedient, reclaiming the sound space and reimagining it anew.

To realise the exhibition, the British Council, the artist and curator work with a local studio in Venice. M + B studios are involved in the process of helping to realise and oversee the creation, installation, maintenance and de-installation of the work in the British Pavilion.

Conversations about matching ambition with realisation, particularly in terms of sustainability and construction that can be reused or re-shown, is important to the studios. M + B Studios is mindful of the impact of transport over impact of material choice. Pieces that would cause undue carbon footprint are sourced locally, making use of the studios knowledge and the craftspeople that live and work in Venice. Ultimately, however, can the economic value of the biennale outweigh the climate toll of this kind of tourism?

The British Council Venice Fellowship

'I still dream that dream'

03-05 September 2022

Zolforosso Terzo Spazio, Venice

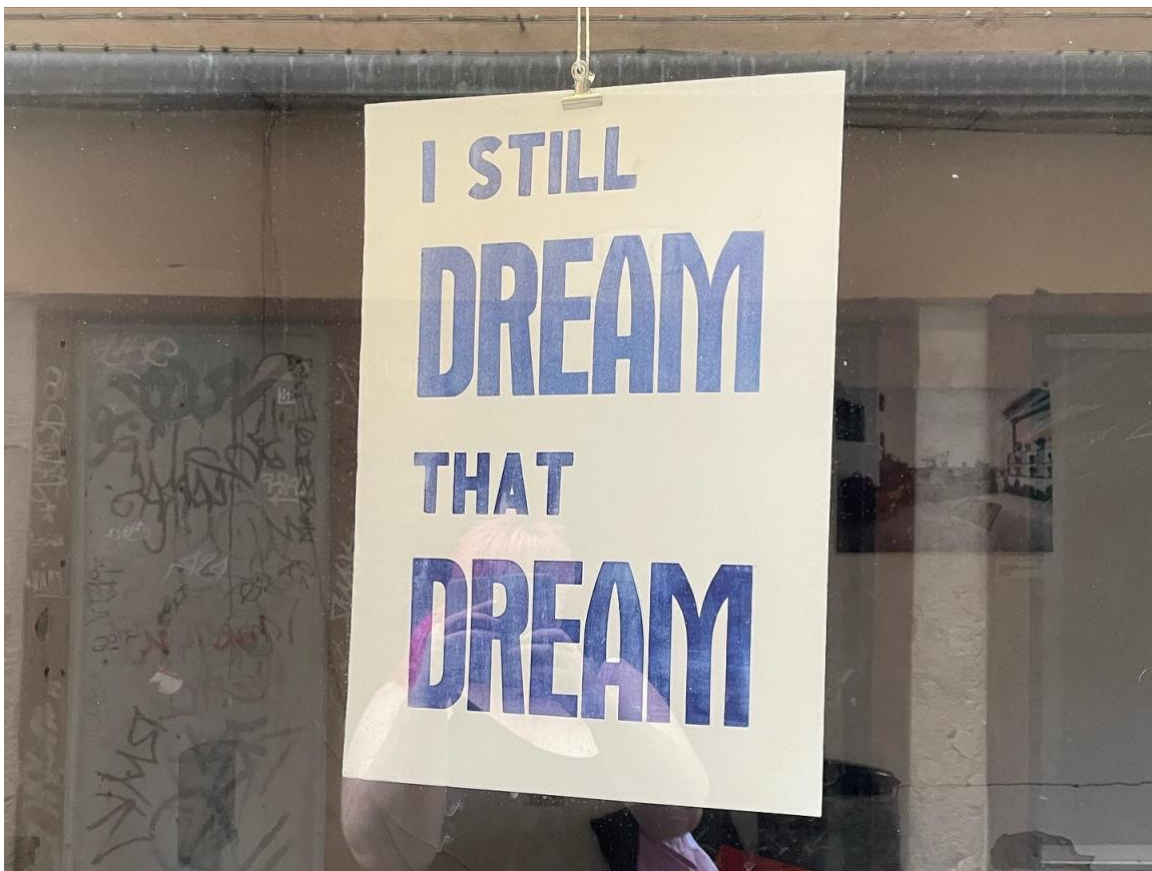


Figure 4 *'I still dream that dream, 03-05 September 2022, Zolforosso Terzo Spazio*

Several of the fellows at the British Pavilion have collaborated to create an exhibition that also can be seen through the lens of the disobedient body. Curated by Emma Fearon and Jessica Wan with works by Khadeeja Hamid, Agnes Fouda, and Reezan Simbawa, *'I still dream that dream'* explores the spirit of experimentation through transnational cultural collaborations.

Alemani intends *The Milk of Dreams* to "...trace kinships and affinities between artistic methods and practices...to create new layers of meaning and bridge present and past..." (Fossa Margutti and Achenbach, 2022. p 46). *I still dream that dream* similarly creates new layers of meaning by sensitively shaping a space for kinships and affinities to be traced, through a centring of the migrant identity.

The migrant body presents as a disobedient body in so far as she too becomes othered by the dominant culture into which she enters. Apparently out of place, often politically positioned by reductive rhetoric as a convenient scapegoat for all the problems of the country into which they have arrived, these migrant bodies become disobedient by default.

Reclaiming their agency, the artists exhibiting in *I still dream that dream*, offer a generous space of trust and openness, sharing sacred and cultural practices in an effort to find meaningful connections with those who choose to engage.

This collaborative working practice could also be considered as a signifier of disobedience; to work with new communities through a barter and in-kind exchange is not so common in the age of neoliberal individualism, the system under which capitalism thrives. These collective groups become a new body, a disobedient one made of many parts, that circumnavigates the traditional manner in which we are expected to work. Atomised disobedient bodies, working collectively, forming systems of protection and safety for themselves. Mirroring the diasporic migrant community.

Somewhere between exhibition and project space, *I still dream that dream* embodies the nebulous process that creative communities generate when research and practice are ongoing, vulnerably revealing works in progress in a bold gesture that invites critique and care. Framed by a delicate approach to collaborative practices and an acknowledgement that projects of this sort do not happen in a vacuum, they are nurtured and supported by many. In this instance, the curators have worked to develop a relationship of reciprocity between themselves, local artists lab Zolforosso, and the British Council. This tentative extension of community and collaboration necessitates openness in communication, but also sidesteps the difficulties one would experience as an individual in attempting to work in this way. The curators and artists, keenly aware that they are benefitting from the support of an existing network, worked hard to make exchanges worthwhile, to offer extensions to networks that might arise if Zolforosso members find themselves in a situation in which they can facilitate.

Born out of a necessity, the material culture of migration holds an intense connection to a notion of home, a home that is carried in heart and possessions only. A capability to declare home in even the most hostile of environments. Its materiality speaks of loss, of intimacy, of sacredness and of resilience. In comparison, the Western ideal of minimalism speaks from a position of privilege. White minimalist houses declare, quite starkly, that neither trauma nor cultural heritage are present, that no working-class sentimentality is tolerated.

Much as Reni Eddo-Lodge describes “white absence” as whiteness considered as the norm for society to the point where it becomes invisible and thereby defines everything else as “other” (Eddo-Lodge, 2018, p86), and Grayson Perry terms “default man” as the setting by which society operates, as though the male experience is the norm and all else is the other (Perry, 2017, p14), so too does the minimal domestic interior become the supposed default of taste. As David Batchelor suggests, the white minimalist interior is “...a world that [doesn’t] readily admit the existence of other worlds.” (Batchelor, 2000, p10)



Figure 5 Installation view of *I still dream that dream*, works by Khadeeja Hamid. 2022

Quietly asserting their cultural heritage, the artists in *I still dream that dream*, inhabit the gallery space with the material culture of migration, gently insisting the space recognise their existence. Khadeeja Hamid discreetly occupies a corner of the gallery with, what at first glance, appears to be a reconstruction of a living space, complete with rug, lights, cushions and a film projection onto a dilapidated wall as the focal point.

Hamid makes dual usage of the material conditions of migration, allowing them to be read both aesthetically and narratively. The patterned rug around which the installation is centred holds multiple values; placing belongings on a rug and rolling it up allows one to transport a basic version of home from place to place. This reading is reinforced through the film, *Foreign, Familiar and Strange*, 3m 16s, 2021. The patterned rug is a motif that weaves the audience through the film and the installation. We're invited to consider the rooted and the transitory. The objects that are taken on the migrant's journey are selected for portability, necessity and their capacity to make a home. They contain a particular materiality – memory, identity, conflict and culture, generational trauma and familial histories. When state sanctioned identities are questioned, these objects become, as Hamid states, "talismanic portals into memory."



Figure 6 Sacred Within; Within Venice, 2022, Reezan Simbawa, installation view from I still dream that dream

Reezan Simbawa's project searches for the sacred in transitory spaces. Knowing there would be a migrant Muslim population present in Venice, Simbawa wanted to document the spaces in which prayer could take place. Her time on the fellowship was spent visiting shops and restaurants, searching for Muslims who worked in those places, carefully building trust through shared experience and religion in order to record places of prayer. A chance encounter led Simbawa to locate a rose seller who would often pray at sundown in a quiet corner by a canal when working in busy tourist areas. Others used shops and courtyards. One striking image depicts an unfolded, unused pizza box aligned towards Mecca.

Simbawa's dedication to nurturing trusting relationships helped to create a temporary community, extending the intimate and secluded sacred spaces into a fleeting network of shared experience, linked through her. The methodology for this brief project is not overtly apparent, but its guiding and delicate hand is revealed through Simbawa's capacity to be welcomed into the personal, sacred and intimate spaces of strangers, which she sensitively shares in the exhibition.

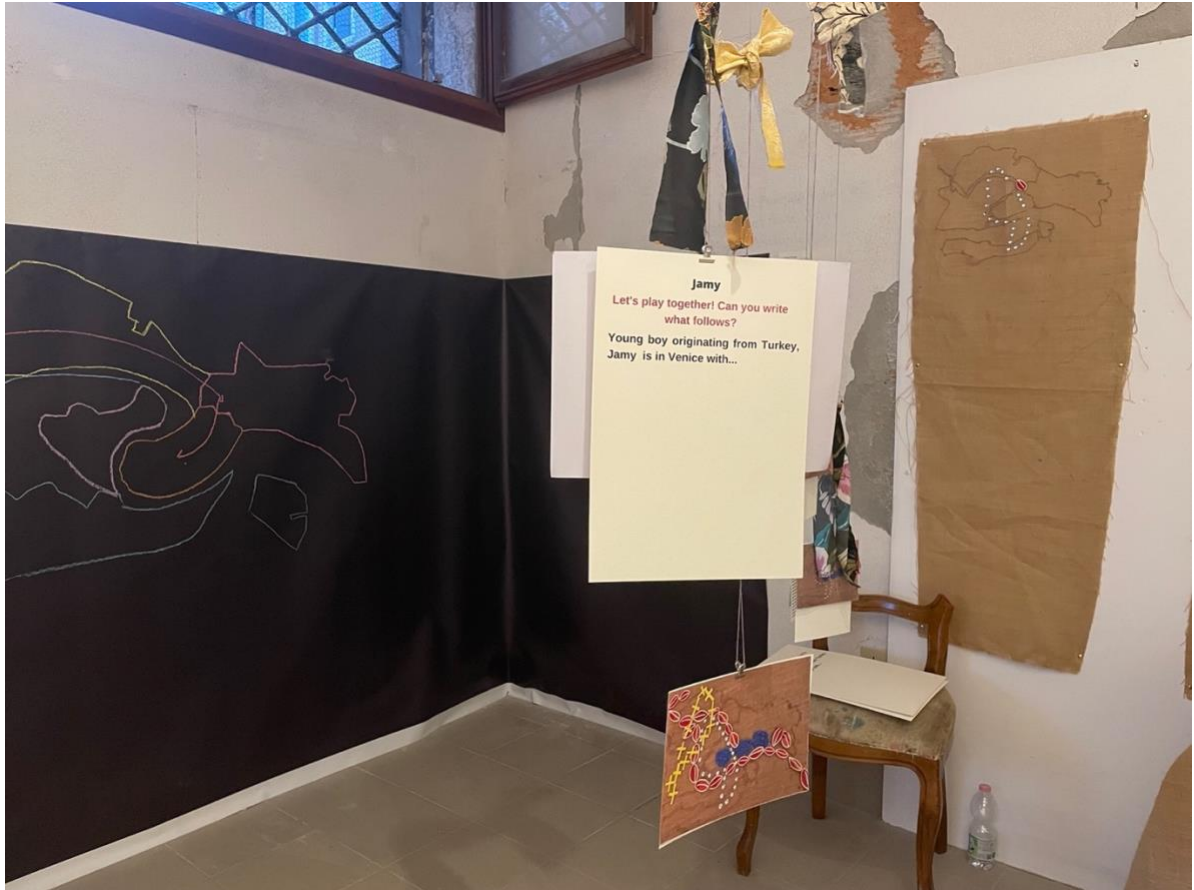


Figure 7 Installation view of Agnes Fouda research work as part of *I still dream that dream*, 2022.

A strength of *I still dream that dream* is the willingness of the curators to forefront the often-unseen research practices of artists alongside works in progress and finished pieces. Agnes Fouda worked in an action research capacity during her fellowship, creating a fleeting community of collaborators, inviting them to trace their journeys and migrations to and around Venice.

Warmly inviting them to share their experiences, Fouda embarked on the long process of collecting stories and anecdotes from a breadth of local residents and tourists alike. Working with participants to determine a motif and colour for their passage, Fouda will undertake the task of embroidering an oversize tapestry of their travels, weaving each journey together, over and around a map of Venice to create a vibrant chronicle of migration inspired by the city and its inhabitants.

Conclusion

The 59th Biennale Arte, The Milk of Dreams and the British Council Fellowship has been a fruitful site from which to explore artistic community and production across difference. For me, Alemani's generative curation echoes across each element of the biennale. From the main exhibitions, international contributions and the inclusion of fellowship schemes by the British Council amongst others, the spirit of transformed boundaries "*...that remap subjectivities, hierarchies, and anatomies...*" (Fossa Margutti and Achenbach, 2022. P44)

have been given fertile ground in which to propagate. Quite literally in the case of Precious Okoyomon's *To See the Earth Before the End of the World*, 2022.



Figure 8 Installation view of Precious Okoyomon, *To See the Earth Before the End of the World*, 2022, Arsénale,

Beyond this, our fellowship group has found a sense of community and connection that would otherwise not have been brought together, with many of us still in contact with one another, discussing the embodied and disobedient for future artistic endeavours.

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