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# ASIAN ART NEWS

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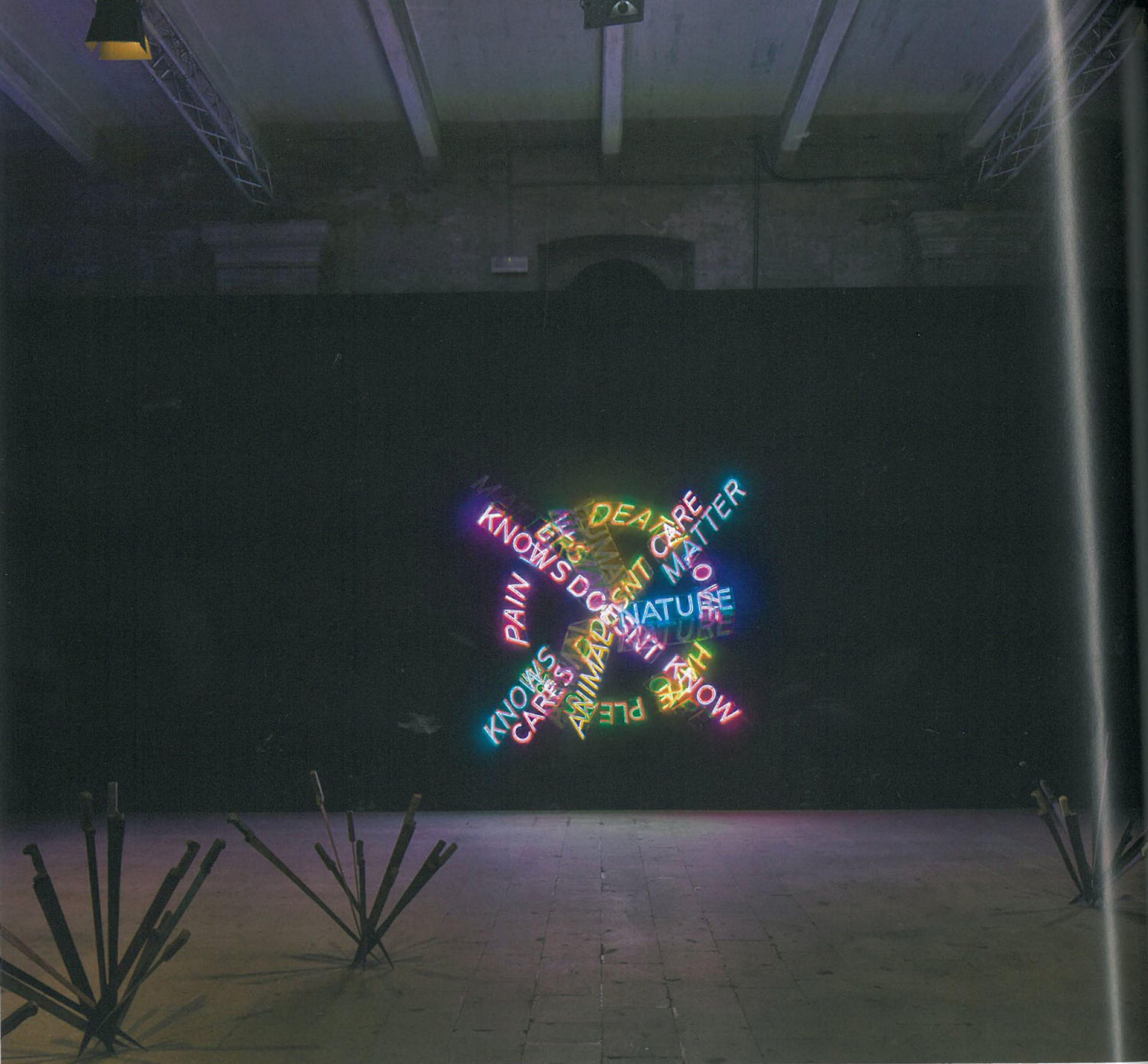


## FAN SHAOHUA



**Zhong Kaitian** \* **56th Venice Biennale**  
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Bruce Nauman, **American Violence**, 1981-1982, neon and Adel Abdessemed, **Nymphs**, 2015, dimensions variable. Installation view at the 56th International Art Exhibition - la Biennale di Venezia, *All the World's Futures*. Photograph by Alessandra Chemollo. Courtesy: la Biennale di Venezia.

# *Venetian Cool*

*Over the 56 editions of the Venice Biennale there have been numerous remarkable artistic successes and stunning failures. But as a one-off platform for world art it remains one of the most engaging art events in a now bloated international art calendar. The current edition continues to draw praise and ire, which perhaps is as it should always be.*

By Robert C. Morgan



The title of the foregoing overview in addressing some of the critical issues involved in the current *56th Biennale di Venezia* was influenced by a phrase taken from the late-Canadian media analyst Marshall McLuhan. In the early 1960s, McLuhan invented the term “medium cool” in reference to television, specifically analog television, which was the only manifestation of television available at that time. Somehow I felt McLuhan’s term was appropriate to the mood I felt willfully trudging through the Arsenale in Venice in search of something that would take me beyond detachment and cynicism. I was seeking another level of sensory cognition, where the text on the screen was not the prerequisite for coming to terms with the delicate process of negotiating what one knows in relation to what one sees.

It was a tough row to hoe this year. Rather than remain in the Arsenale building the entire time, I decided to occasionally move out-of-doors and follow the parallel walkway where literally hundreds of jude coal sacks, affixed with metal brackets and rope, hung the full length of the corridor. It was not clear whether this was a work of art or a construction site.

Much later I discovered it was a “site-specific installation,” titled *Out of Bounds* (2014) by Ibrahim Mahama. One could call it an installation of sorts, but it was unclear that the corridor had been at one time related to coal. Given its unpleasant and depressing aura, it was surely intended as a “conceptual” work, an idea fused with political content.

I mention this as a prologue to suggest that, if you went to the Arsenale and found yourself reading more than seeing, wandering more than focusing, one might consider the role that the various committees and institutions involved in this enterprise make such work possible. Do they really hope to engage us in

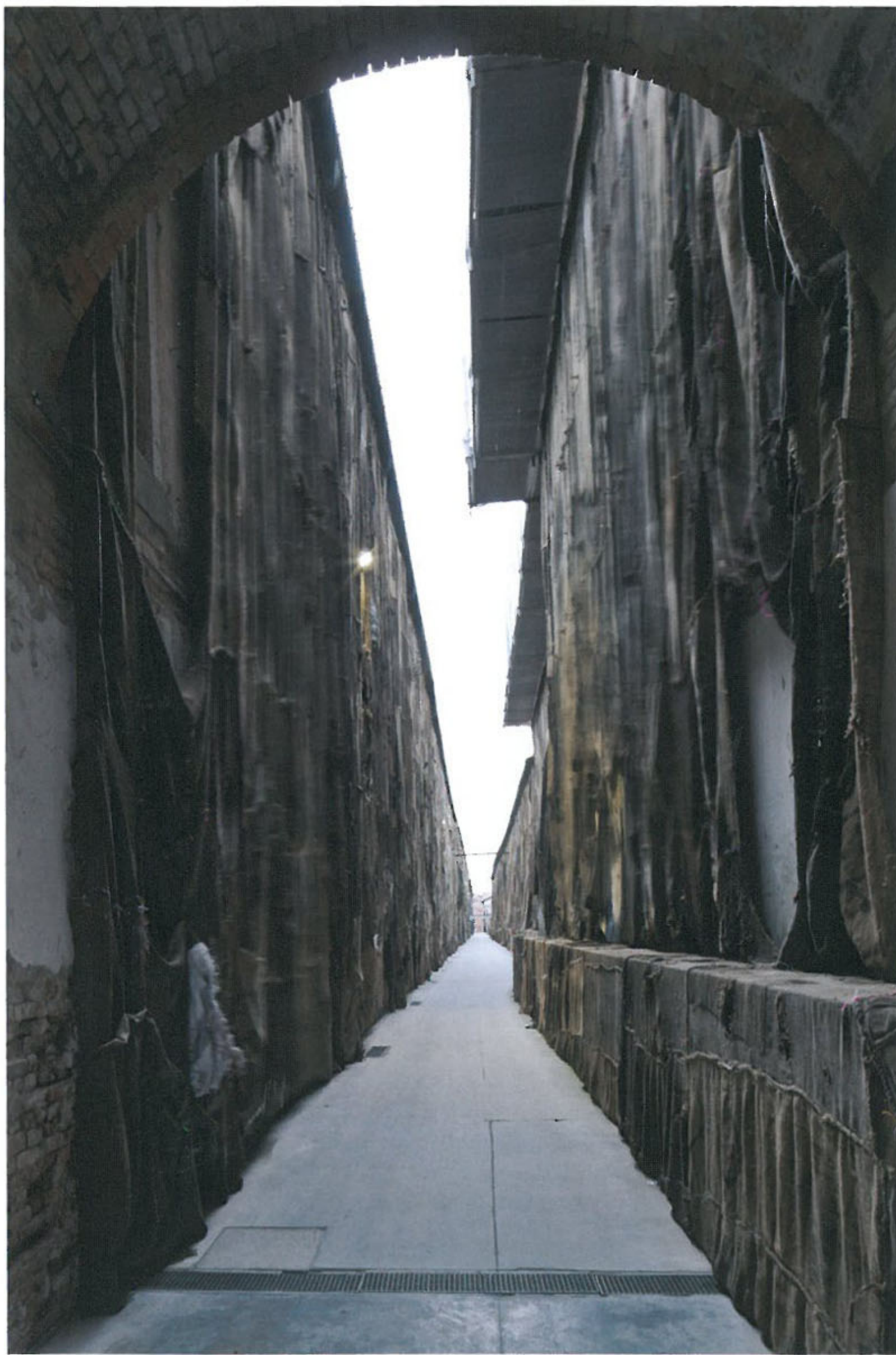
a form of pedagogy that goes beyond the frame and the pedestal and into the realm of digital projections and infinite scenarios where objects and materials, synthetic and natural, are piled and placed, broken and tattered, scattered and scarred, or, occasionally, bright and shiny? These phenomena are called “installations.” The time-based counterpart to this would be a genre known as “performance art,” as, for example, when someone systematically makes a strange series of gestures in

of art they actually put in their homes and enjoyed having as part of their lives.

For some viewers at the Arsenale and the International Pavilion at the Giardini, the questions raised about various work being shown appeared less concerned with legitimacy, or, for that matter, even money. Rather the questions were related to how interesting, profound, or original was the work. Traversing the *Biennale*, there were numerous opportunities to raise this question. For example,

how does one locate art in a display of materials, images, texts, or actions, when no particular form is apparent? The inquiry became increasingly problematic as the days wore on, and I persistently tried to grasp the three *Filters* contained in this large-scale exhibition enterprise, this year curated by the renowned director of Munich’s Haus der Kunst, Mr. Okwei Enwezor and titled (ironically?) *All the World’s Futures*.

In the brochure that accompanies this year’s *Biennale*, Enwezor explains: “... *All the World’s Futures* is informed by a layer of three intersecting *Filters*, namely: *Garden of Disorder*, *Liveness: On Epic Duration*, and *Reading Capital*. The three *Filters* represent a constellation of parameters, which will be touched upon in order to imagine and realize a diversity of practices.” There appears to be an intention here as well, a setting of the stage, so to speak, or what Enwezor calls “the notion of the exhibition as stage where historical and counter-historical projects will be explored.” More specifically, the stated intention



Ibrahim Mahama, *Out of Bounds*, 2014, site-specific installation, jude sacks for coal, metal, rope, 182.9 x 10.4 m and 198.1 x 9.4 m. Photograph: Alessandra Chemollo. Courtesy: la Biennale di Venezia.

a designated space or someone else reads a lengthy quotation by Karl Marx out of context depending on which paragraph you happen to hear. In recent years, many such works (and artists) have been institutionally sanctified and legitimized and are now being collected the way middle-class professionals (not billionaires) once understood art on a deeper historical and philosophical level, and acquired works

sounds like one of Michel Foucault’s dialectical paradigms where nothing is fixed and everything is in flux, where there is an avoidance of a clearly marked position that erodes the possibility of any advance in terms of how human beings see art as a paradigm of the present and thereby are able to obtain a grasp of what needs to be done.

Instead, the message of this



*Biennale* appears too distant, too academically elitist, and strangely removed from the political and aesthetic concerns that educated visitors are seeking, perhaps believing that advanced art might assist in opening a crack in the door to the future. Little of this was available to visitors either in the International Pavilion in the Giardini or in the Arsenale. The reading of *Das Kapital* as a marathon endurance proclamation does nothing to inform us of where art (or Marxism) is moving or for that matter where global politics today finds its connection to such a feat. The tendency to re-contextualize Walker Evans's photographs (from the 1930s) and Hans Haacke's *Gallery Profiles* (from the 1970s) seemed out of context. Bruce Nauman's attempt at re-contextualizing the early S/M neons upon entry to the Arsenale accompanied by circular configurations of large butcher knives by Adel Absesmed appears as a weakened illustration related to some spurious, albeit vague comment on violence. I could not find the upgrade in redeeming social value. Any attempt to place these works—by three major artists—in a present-day context simply failed for reasons of mediocrity by way of contextual association.

The works from the present by seemingly lesser-known artists, shown primarily in the Arsenale, were oddly out of date as soon as they appeared on the walls. Dare I say, the *Biennale* shares the burden of institutional intentionality as well as any art school, at least, in the manner the text foregrounds the experience, even when the politics are deadly serious, which it appeared too often. The alternative to this "vision" had to be found elsewhere, and it could be found in two remarkable auxiliary exhibitions outside the official premises of the *Biennale* and two exhibitions worthy of note inside the Giardini. The laurels of the entire *Biennale* seemed to rest on the extraordinary ideas these exhibitions had to offer.

**O**n the optimistic side, one finds *Proportio* at the magnificent Palazzo Fortuny, curated by Axel



Codazzi and Ellsworth Kelly (installation view), Piano Nobile, Palazzo Fortuny. © Jean-Pierre Gabriel. [Ellsworth Kelly (b.1923), **Red, Yellow, Blue III**, 1963, oil on canvas, 231 x 231 cm. Fondation Marguerite et Aimé Maeght, Sant Paul-de-Vence.

Vervoordt and Daniela Ferretti. This is the fifth in a series of exhibitions curated by Vervoordt, beginning in 2007 with the highly acclaimed *Artempo*, always in the same Palazzo and always in relation to the time of previous incarnations of the *Biennale di Venezia*. Consistently first-

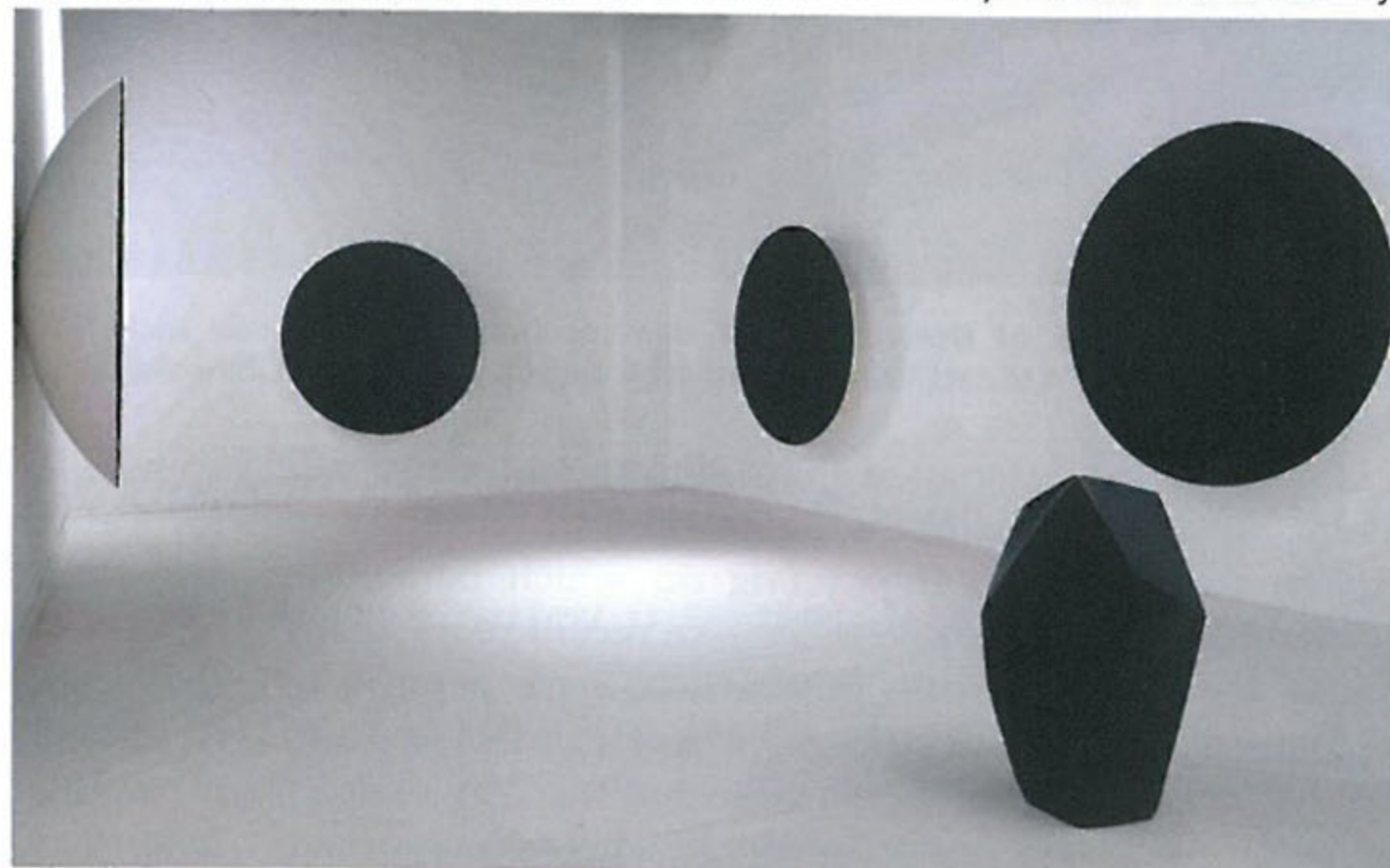
rate, this year's *Proportio* examines "the omnipresence of universal proportions in art, science, music, and architecture" and further aims "to initiate a contemporary dialogue surrounding the lost knowledge of proportions and sacred geometry." In other words, the focus of *Proportio* has

chosen to examine fundamental values present (or missing) in the way we choose to live. In *Proportio*, artists are presented in a shamanistic light as human beings who offer a sense of healing or fortitude in coming to terms with our reality. It is not about sweltering in the pits of despair, but about acting on one's belief to contribute a heightened manner of thinking and feeling in how we see ourselves in relation to the world in which we live.

Here are a few examples: The logo for the exhibition is a square painting by the American artist, Ellsworth Kelly, titled *Red, Yellow, Blue* (1963). This simple, though monumental painting sets the stage for the exhibition. Upon entry, the lower level includes a series of five pavilions "made with measurements including the square root of 2, the square, the golden mean, the square root of 5, and the square root of 3." Conceived by Tatasuro Miki and Vervoordt, these five shel-



Berlinde De Bruyckere's **Romeu**, 2010 and Henri Foucault's **Thais**, 2008. © Jean-Pierre Gabriel. Installation view of the exhibition *Proportio* at Palazzo Fortuny.



Anish Kapoor's **Gathering Clouds**, 2014 and Alberto Giacometti's **Le Cube**, 1934-1935 © Jean-Pierre Gabriel. Installation view of the exhibition *Proportio* at Palazzo Fortuny.



ters harken back to Pythagoras in their eloquence and simplicity. They are constructed using natural fibers that come from the *Cannabis Sativa* plant – fibers used in the construction of architecture, clothing, sails, ropes, and paper, beginning three millennia ago. This mark of simplicity suggests a universal way of thinking in relation to what is necessary to live enjoyably through the most modest means without exploiting resources, including fossil fuels from other countries.

The theme of the exhibition continues on each of the upper three floors. The first floor juxtaposes ancient stone carvings, vessels, and fossils from thousands of years ago with paintings by modern and contemporary artists, such as Josef Albers and Victor Vasarely. The same floor also included two “silent rooms”—one with sculpture by Anish Kapoor and Alberto Giacometti, and another with abstract paintings by Raoul De Keyser and Brice Marden in relation to rope sculpture affixed from ceiling to floor by the late Fred Sandback.

The second floor heralds highly reductive paintings by three contemporary masters: an elusive grid by Agnes Martin, a black painting by Ad Reinhardt, and a white painting by Robert Ryman. The third floor contains remarkable paintings by three East Asian painters, including works by Ha Chong-Hyun and Chung Chang-Sup (Korea) and a powerful work by the Japanese Gutai artist, Kazuo Shiraga. These works are accompanied by a site-specific sound installation, titled *Ten Thousand Stars*, by Marina Abramovic. *Proportio* moves between modest objects, photographs, and paintings to supremely crafted installations and the feeling of moving between stars in the universe. One leaves this exhibition filled with an exemplary relationship to the act of seeing itself, that is, seeing as a way of feeling differently about the world in which we live.



Installation view of *Dansaekhwa*, 2015. Photograph by Fabrice Seixas. Courtesy of Kukje Gallery.



Chung Chang-Sup (1927–2011), **Wandering**, 1965, oil on canvas, 198 x 116.5 cm. Photograph by Sang-tae Kim. The Rachofsky Collection.

As a reaction against this show, some may want to impeach the curator of actively participating in the marketing of art, including some of the objects in the exhibition. I suppose one can only say that there are some who look at art only through the window of investment and profit, which irrationally forms a basic criterion for judging the curatorial aspect of *Proportio*. But Vervoordt appears to be looking at his project differently—not only as a market, but also as objects, paintings, photographs, architecture, music, design, and film—all of which mean something special to him in the sense that art in its totality carries the propensity to heal mind/body/spirit—not through the isolating of sensory modes in our experience, but by allowing the sensory connectedness to come forth into the foreground of expression and experience. This is perhaps the manner in which some shamans understood their transformative role in society—not through the denial of practical everyday realities, but through attending to what is primary and essential at the outset in order that human beings might discover for themselves a fulfilling life.



Ha Chong-Hyun (b.1935), **Work 73-13**, 1973, barbed wire on panel, 120 x 240 cm. Photograph by Sang-tae Kim. Courtesy of Kukje Gallery.

Another interesting exhibition installed on three floors of the Palazzo Contarini - Polignac, titled *Dansaekhwa* (translated as “monochrome” in Korea), is a highly selective exhibition of artists representing arguably the most important art movement of the 20th century in the Republic of Korea. The artist Kim Whanki, who lived most of his mature career in New York, was not directly connected with *Dansaekhwa* but is considered by many as having a close affinity with the movement, which is worthy of note. The other six artists were actively engaged in the movement and met, on and off, more or less regularly at one another’s studios in Seoul. They include Chung Chang-Sup,



Chung Sang-Hwa, Ha Chong-Hyun, Kwon Young-Woo, Lee Ufan, and Park Seo Bo. Although the *Dansaekhwa* exhibition was elegantly and intelligently presented in the galleries of the Palazzo, the most important figure of this movement, Yun Hyong-Keun (1928–2007), was nowhere to be seen or mentioned. Korea is a small country, yet *Dansaekhwa* has become a major contribution to the history of contemporary art in the 20th century for which it should take pride. It is a shame when petty politics stands in the way of presenting a movement with accuracy and authority. Whereas this could have been a defining moment in articulating a leading movement among artists at a strategic moment in the history of Korean art, it reads as a petty argument, a biased statement that eventually will need correction. It is curious to note that during this exhibition Yun Hyong-Keun is being shown at the Gallery Yamaguchi in Osaka.

**B**ack to the Giardini, there are two important exhibitions worthy of mention: one is the Tsibi Geva exhibition at the Israel Pavilion, and the other is Joan Jonas a video performance artist representing the United States. The Israel Pavilion cannot be missed. It is covered on all side with used automobile tires, possibly as an homage to the Happenings by artist Allan Kaprow who filled the adjacent garden at the Martha Jackson Gallery in 1961 with used tires, thus momentarily shifting the socio-economic identity of art. Instead in the Pavilion most of the paintings (Geva is known primarily as a painter) are of consumer goods that have been consumed and now the detritus has become a form of abstract art, recalling that each work is a temporary record of the appearance of detritus at any given moment. Each work is like yesterday's newspapers, but the affect is uncanny, disturbing, and pow-



Tsibi Geva, *Lattice*, 2015, iron, found objects, 140 x 1,020 x 50 cm.



The Israeli Pavilion's *Tire Walls* (detail), 2015, Bres, cable Bes, found materials.



Tsibi Geva, *Untitled*, 2012, diptych, acrylic on canvas, 200 x 300 cm. From *Tsibi Geva, Archeology of the Present*, 2015, The Israeli Pavillon at the 56th International Art Exhibition - la Biennale di Venezia, 2015. Photographs by Elad Sarig.

erfully beautiful in the same moment.

As far as I know, the term "video-performance" begins with the artist Joan Jonas around 1971. Her career is a fusion between the two mediums. As one critic pointed out in *The New York Times* (May 8, 2015), for five decades Jonas has managed to avoid the trends. She has followed her own course. This Pavilion is filled with mirrors, silhouettes, and shadows at every turn, and with many video projections. Images include the artist walking slowly with a cane on a large expanse of beachfront while in another she caresses stalks of wheat as if playing a harp. A third projection reveals children dressed in white making mysterious percussive sounds with bundles of sticks. The subtle, poetic, offhand nature of these projections is entrancing. They speak of the inevitability of sculpture today as being tied to the performance desires of human beings who would rather delight in mythical forms of play than be cast eternally in bronze. Δ

Robert C. Morgan is the New York editor of *Asian Art News* and *World Sculpture News*.



Joan Jonas, *They Come to Us without a Word II*, 2015, performance with music by Jason Moran. Teatro Piccolo Arsenale, Venice. Pavilion of the United States, the 56th International Art Exhibition - la Biennale di Venezia, presented by the MIT List Visual Arts Center. Courtesy the Artist. Photograph by Moira Ricci.

