

## THE 2019 VENICE BIENNALE

Views on *Goodbye Dragon Inn* and *BLKNWS*



Tsai Ming-Liang, *Goodbye, Dragon Inn* (2003), frame enlargements. Courtesy the Venice Biennale.

The 2019 Venice Art Biennale, *May You Live in Interesting Times*, has been noted as having a central theme of “mirroring,” a doubling in the works presented. In the film, performance, and video works I will discuss, however, the doubling is used as a contestation between the material and the virtual and is enacted to historical purpose. As a distinctive feature of our times, elements in these works recycle, reflect and re-populate across various iterations.

*Goodbye Dragon Inn* by Taiwanese director Tsai Ming-Liang, for example, a film originally screened at the Venice Film Festival in 2003, was re-shown in 2019 in both the Venice Film Festival and at the Biennale in the Arsenale. In the latter, the screening was immediately followed by a live performance in the adjacent hall. In this location, Tsai enacted a nostalgia for the lost materiality of film and the space of the traditional film theater itself. Another acclaimed piece at the Biennale, *BLKNWS* by Kahlil Joseph, operates on a different register. Almost as a challenge to nostalgia, this multichannel video features the return and reuse of cultural elements, only now to deflect and confront a dominant ideology, and so challenge history.

In the Biennale’s exhibition of *Goodbye Dragon Inn*, Tsai took the viewer down a rabbit hole of reflections, with a feeling of simultaneously spiraling downward, and deflecting outward. The film itself was screened in a black box theater that seemed to be an exact double of the theater seen on screen. Tsai’s film has the feel of nostalgia because it presents a nearly empty Odeon Theater in Taipei as it screens a Taiwanese classic film, *The Dragon Inn*, made in 1967. Seated in the theater of the projected film we see a child and an elderly man (embodying the filmmaker as a young boy and his grandfather), and then the actor of the original *Dragon Inn* at an older age. The theater space depicted in *Goodbye Dragon Inn* as an almost empty location includes a screening room, a box office, and walkways. As the film progresses a woman with a club foot emerges as the central character. We watch her move through these spaces, adding slowness and repetitive sounds, foregrounding the material conditions of the film theater, and reflecting on the type of space that is historically receding.

These observations were then redoubled in the live performance. Tsai made a personal appearance and recounted his childhood memory of attending the Odeon Theater with his



Tsai Ming-Liang, *Goodbye, Dragon Inn* (2003), frame enlargements. Courtesy the Venice Biennale.



grandfather in the 1960s. Tsai then gleefully showed the audience childlike drawings he had recently made of those memories. He even played an analog recording of his favorite song from the movie. The live performance culminated with Tsai welcoming select members of the audience to come into his inner circle as he gave each person a poster of the movie they had just seen. Material, memory, and the drifting away of the past, as well as nostalgia was re-enacted here, and ironized through its insistent presentation.

*BLKNWS* takes a different perspective on the past. Presented at the Biennale as a two-channel video installation, Joseph's piece was designed as a continuously-updated news feed combining appropriated sounds and images of black life gleaned from a variety of sources—including contemporary sources like Instagram and

YouTube, and archival material from broadcast television, cinema, etc.—with staged newsroom sequences and original interviews and documentary sequences. The circulating, ubiquitous nature of media in our digital age is at once acknowledged and reclaimed. *BLKNWS* attempts to reposition the news as it is often consumed, taking media content away from the domination of white-controlled interests, and instead presenting African-American life from the perspective of blackness.

Though Joseph initially pitched *BLKNWS* as an actual news program to a variety of cable networks, the project was rejected in that form. The resulting repositioning of *BLKNWS*—not only at the Biennale, but also at art venues in Los Angeles, Stanford, and other locales—is just as confrontational. The experience of





Kahlil Joseph, *BLKNWS* (2018), frame enlargement. Courtesy the artist and Gamma Wave Films.

watching *BLKNWS* is exhilarating. It lifts the viewer by means of its virtual images as found objects, now re-combined to address the conditions of black life. The images are directed primarily to a black audience, one that greets them with acknowledged familiarity, and to a wider audience that must acknowledge their human truth, and their renewed subject position. The organization of images is controlled not only by Joseph, but by an editorial team made up of a diverse population of young people who continuously update the *BLKNWS* content.

The past here is not looked at as nostalgia but is rather re-contextualized in a principal of opposition. Affirmative views

of black life—from the quotidian to the spectacular—are foregrounded and celebrated to counteract the marginalization of such views within mainstream American culture. Joseph's characteristic use of montage continues with the rhythm of movement across shots, with the counterpoint and compliance of the music, and the attendant meanings that proliferate. This is facilitated by the dual-panel video format (with Cornell West, for example, on one panel supporting the dignity of black people, immigrants and members of the LGBTQ community, while the white newscaster on the other panel reframes West's statement as supporting the rights of "ordinary" middle class people), as

well as by Joseph's decision to install the video monitors against a background image. In Venice, *BLKNWS* was installed both at the Arsenale and at the Giardini, but in one location, the video monitors were positioned before a large photograph of a group of black nuns, and in the other location, an image of a group of black soldiers. As "we" (a largely privileged white middle class audience who have had the means to travel to Venice) watch *BLKNWS* we are greeted by an assembly of black people staring back at us. This confrontation is historically resonant. It challenges the white subject position of the news that is being presented, as well as

the white-dominated space in which these images are viewed. We understand that it is all a matter of how we see the world, and from which perspective we see it, especially when these spaces have been historically restricted for black subjects by economic, social, or even legal conditions. The image of *BLKNWS* is steeped in the virtual because of its sources but grounded in the material realities of daily life.

VERA DIKA