

Klima Biennale Wien

various venues, Vienna, 5 April to 14 July

'Why did the flower fade?' This is one of several questions asked by the narrator of Thao Nguyen Phan's 2019 film *Becoming Alluvium*, which tells of reincarnation and renewal from a context of ecological catastrophe, specifically, in 2018, the devastating bursting of a dam on the Mekong River that runs from the Tibetan Plateau into the South China Sea. The narrator answers the question immediately: 'I pressed it to my heart with anxious love', they explain, 'that is why the flower faded.' The ideas that Phan touches upon – about anxiety and love, how to respond to loss, and the tendency of certain dominant cultures to destroy precisely what they claim to cherish – are ones that run throughout Klima Biennale Wien: 'the world's first international climate art festival', according to the promotional material.

Phan's film sits in the centre of 'Songs for the Changing Seasons', a group show curated by Lucia Petroiusti and Filipa Ramos, which provides the Biennale with some of its most expansive and poetic perspectives. The exhibition takes place inside Nordwestbahnhof, a former train station and bus garage in the north of Vienna. Away from the tourists in the historic centre, this is exactly the kind of not-yet-developed location that many biennales have come to inhabit (during the Biennale's run, the site is also home to several climate-related design projects, student exhibitions, screenings and events).

'Songs for the Changing Seasons' navigates themes of love, loss and ecological grief across a range of media; for example, Sofia Jernberg's 2024 sound installation, which gives the show its title, fills an old peeling corridor with extraordinary experimental vocals that are by turns exuberant, absurd, heart-breaking and tragic. Depictions of animals recur throughout the show: from Joan Jonas's 70 drawings of fish in blue ink (*they come to us without a word II*, 2013–23), which are pinned together to form a permeable wall across the space, to Lin May Saeed's *Sea Dragon Relief*, 2021, an underwater diorama in which the two titular sea creatures are painted and carved from Styrofoam. Against this context, Laure Prouvost's 13-metre-long wool tapestry, *Flying Mother (The Bird Ban Her) Part 2*, 2022, stands out for its powerful migratory imagery, where an elongated blue figure flows horizontally through a sky surrounded by birds, their arms blurring into wing and frond-like protrusions of leaf and crop.

Away from Nordwestbahnhof, the Biennale – an initiative of the City of Vienna – has a more institutional feel. Biennale partners include Fotoarsenal Wien, the MAK (Museum of Applied Arts), and the Weltmuseum (World Museum), while several city-supported artist-run spaces also contribute to the programme with climate-themed exhibitions of contemporary art. Yet, across the Biennale, with minimal framing from artistic director Andreas Schulze and



Joan Jonas, *they come to us without a word II*, 2013–23, installation view

programme director Sithara Pathirana beyond engagement with climate change, there is a risk of projects blurring together.

The hub of the Biennale is at KunstHausWien, an art museum designed by Viennese artist and architect Friedensreich Hundertwasser, where two floors given over to his work have recently been rehung to emphasise ecological themes (the artist's questionable politics and personality, however, are given less examination). On the floors above is the exhibition 'Into the Woods', a forest-themed group show intelligently curated by Sophie Haslinger. The choice of the preposition 'into' is perhaps indicative of an exhibition that is primarily conceived from outside the forest; despite an acknowledgement by the curator of our co-dependence with such environments, the forest is still conceptualised as a place 'over there'. Yet the strongest works overflow this framing, such as Jeewi Li's tall rubbing-like *Paths I and II*, 2024, which incorporates fine *hanji* paper and *takbon*, a Korean printing technique, to focus attention on the proliferation, thanks to monocultural forest management and the unfolding climate crisis, of bark beetles that now decimate the pine trees of the Harz forest in northern Germany. There is something devastatingly beautiful about the way these written-walked beetle lines ghost their way through the black ink.

Abel Rodriguez's lively drawings of animals and trees in the Amazon rainforest, such as *Tierra Firme II*, 2018, are another vital inclusion among a mostly European artist roster and provide an important contrast to Richard Mosse's apocalyptic techno-sublime photography. Where Rodriguez makes work from within the forest, Mosse and his expensive camera equipment occupy the view from above; like the photographer Ed Burtynsky, the criticality Mosse hopes to explore is increasingly lost amid a predilection for spectacle.

Far more successful is 'Footprints in the Valley', a 2020 series by Eline Benjaminsen and Elias Komaiyo. Benjaminsen, an artist based in Norway, collaborated with Komaiyo, a Sengwer indigenous community leader from the Embobut Forest in Kenya, to explore the financialisation of forests through carbon-offsetting.

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The film details a series of tree wounds, precise gestural marks left in the bark by indigenous people who have used small sections of tree while leaving the whole alive. By contrast, a series of photographs show the absences that remain after Sengwer people have been evicted by the forces of corporate colonialism acting in the name of ‘conservation’. International environmental organisations often act according to the same logic of appropriation and exclusion that characterises the extractive corporations they claim to oppose. In this context, such work counters the assumption that, if trees are intrinsically good, then afforestation is always to be approved, with scant regard paid to local specifics. It is also a reminder (one sadly necessary in an art world still content to work with organisations mired in controversies such as the World Wildlife Fund) that conservation projects are often enacted according to violent neocolonial logics. In a Biennale that otherwise steers clear of Palestine, an unexpected moment occurs in a wide-ranging exhibition about camels at the Welt Museum that also includes a tourist album on loan from the Jewish Museum in Vienna. Made from olive wood and dating to 1950 (two years after the Nakba in which Israeli militias massacred Palestinian villagers and displaced some 750,000 people), the album cover shows a hunched-over (presumably Bedouin) figure walking behind a camel through desert outside Jerusalem. That the very populations and ecosystems that Israeli colonisers were in the process of destroying could be co-opted as a marketing strategy to sell this violent new state to the world is both hard to comprehend and grimly familiar. What kind of belonging to a place first requires the erasure of everything in it? With a jolt, it brings me back to Phan’s film: ‘I pressed it to my heart with anxious love. That is why the flower faded.’

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Studio K.O.S.: Where we have gone

Morena di Luna, Hove, 13 April to 16 June

There is a moment, for Modernism, in which language, the word, shifts and shatters. It’s the moment of Hugo von Hofmannsthal’s *Letter of Lord Chandos*, 1902, of Ferdinand de Saussure’s lectures between 1907 and 1911 on the arbitrary relation of language to its object. That which had both expressed subjectivity and defined the object of experience lay as so much detritus between a problematised self and the world of things. What had been the letter of the law lay powerless. One of Modernism’s responses to this, beginning with Cubism, was the transference of meaning, formerly residing in the word, to form as the object of experience. The consequence was a kind of liberation of the subject. This came with the useful caveat that art’s affiliations to power, even when expressed as resistance, meant that the shattered subject could nearly always recuperate itself. What Modernism also overlooked was that power, that agency delivering the letter of the law, didn’t get the memo on the failure of language. As Theodor Adorno noted in his essay ‘Punctuation Marks’, a ‘communicative language’ of authority emerged in the 1910s, formulated upon ‘lucidity, objectivity, and concise precision’, that reduced language to the ‘protocol sentence’. If Édouard Manet had already anticipated the reconfiguration of the human

subject into object, ‘being’ as nothing more than being represented, now the very language of representation within the state was itself instrumentalised.

Even as its demise was being celebrated by those privileged enough to possess it, annihilate it and slyly recuperate it, the old ideal of a linguistically produced subjectivity, in its Kantian formulations, became the goal for those excluded from it through race, sexuality, gender and class. This quest is where Tim Rollins and his Kids of Survival project fitted from its inception, and where in the wake of Rollins’s death in 2017, Studio KOS continues the argument. In contrast to a tradition of language as abstract form in modern American art (Robert Indiana, Christopher Wool etc), for K.O.S., whose current members started life as disenfranchised, impoverished schoolchildren of the South Bronx in the 1980s under Rollins’s tutelage, the word is both matter and matters for its subjective, historical consequences. For black Americans in particular, that pursuit of identity and meaning lasted most of the 20th century, beginning with the appropriation of the language of power and its juxtaposition with that of black vernacular experience, whether by writers of the Harlem Renaissance or in the later work of Ralph Ellison and James Baldwin. Language remains a site of contest rather than becoming one of aesthetic contemplation. Which is not to say that in some of the works on show at Morena di Luna, notably the group’s address to Nathaniel Hawthorne’s 1850 novel *The Scarlet Letter* and the score of Felix Mendelssohn’s *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, 1843, there isn’t an extraordinary formal beauty to Studio K.O.S.’s interventions. In the former, made in workshops with students at University of Massachusetts and Upward Bound High School, starting from the crude letter A for adulteress hung for life around the neck of Hawthorne’s protagonist, the young Hester Prynne, the group generates a series that invokes the inhabited initials of medieval illuminated manuscripts to reclaim self-identity. A for Acceptance; E for Exhilaration. In doing so Studio K.O.S. takes on the shrilly repressive, public Puritanism directed at the difference of the other that is a fundamental of white America: whether in Hawthorne’s historical novel or the present-day intolerance of evangelical sects for the facts of science or the reproductive rights and sexual choices of others. This ugly tradition is contrasted with the aestheticised letter of the law that is a part of the wider Christian church, with its own history of repression, but also a corresponding subculture of compassion and tolerance utterly lacking in its Puritan strain.

Alongside these two initiatory texts taken from 19th-century white, bourgeois culture, albeit works



Studio K.O.S., ‘Where we have gone’, installation view