

Journal of Curatorial Studies  
Volume 8 Number 2

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## EXHIBITION REVIEWS

### **MARYSIA LEWANDOWSKA, *IT'S ABOUT TIME / ERA ORA***

Curated by Ralph Rugoff, Applied Arts Pavilion Special Project,  
*May You Live In Interesting Times*, 58th Venice Biennale, 11 May – 24  
November 2019

*Reviewed by Paula López Zambrano, Independent Curator*

In the context of the 58th Venice Biennale, *May You Live In Interesting Times*, Marysia Lewandowska investigates the representation and experience of feminism contingent to time. She examines the contributions of women to culture throughout the last century by asserting their active role and creating a space of visibility. Staged in the Applied Arts Pavilion in the Arsenale, the installation confronts the adjective 'interesting' in relation to feminist practices. Within the title of Rugoff's Biennale exhibition, *May You Live In Interesting Times*, the adjective 'interesting' disables the formulation of a concrete judgement and is therefore symptomatic of the ambiguous condition of the contemporary era. The title of Lewandowska's installation, *It's About Time / Era Ora*, not only operates as a thematic designator, with the exhibition being 'about time', but also acts as a rhetorical utterance to advocate for feminism within the construction of today's contemporaneity. This assertion gestures at a resistance towards historical narratives confined by gender inequality. By drawing from material of the documented past, the Polish- and London-based artist transforms the archive into a place of encounter whereby feminist histories reformulate the representation and experience of temporality.

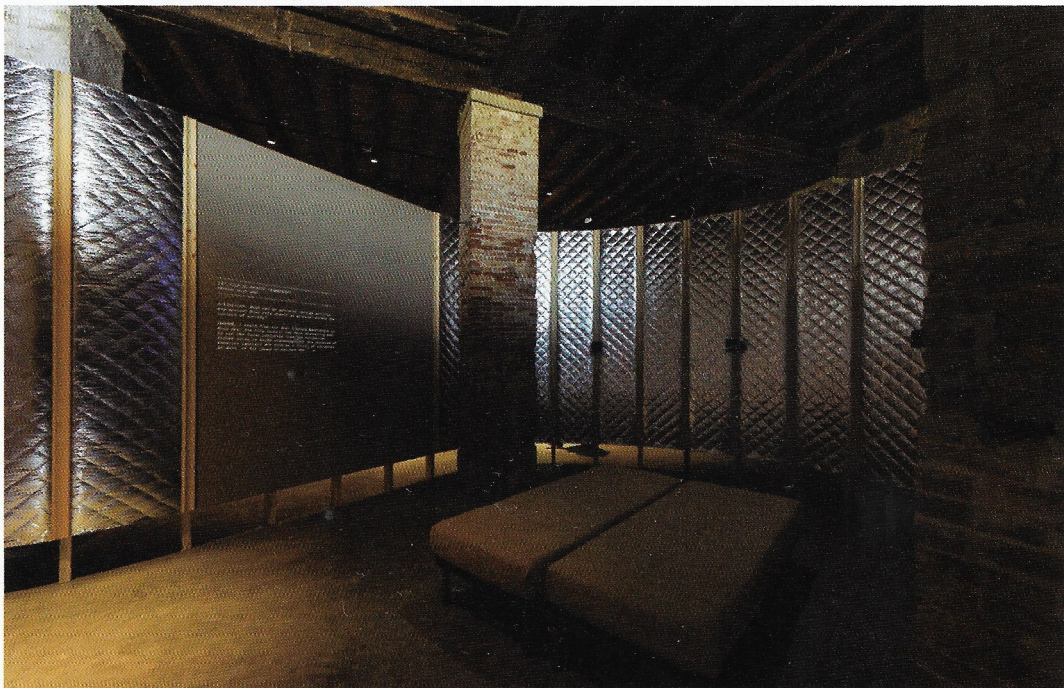
Combining material from two archives – the Victoria and Albert Museum (V&A) Archive in London and the Historical Archives of Contemporary Arts in Venice – Lewandowska's installation comprises images, sound, text, video, conversations, film footage and other sources of information and documentation. A video projection on a single string

curtain that resembles a filmstrip is placed at the entrance of the exhibition; it also serves as a gateway. As in old movies, the video begins with the descending numbers of the cinematographic timer. However, rather than the traditional countdown from the number five, Lewandowska's counter-chronology moves backwards from 58. This numbering represents every edition of the Venice Biennale, starting with 2019 and connecting viewers to the past. The video also includes archival images, including of an opening event in the Giardini for the 37th Venice Biennale in 1976. These images are accompanied by an audio recording of the sounds of museum visitors – a soundtrack that Lewandowska recorded at the V&A. The cinematographic countdown, along with the permeation of light and sound create a sense of anticipation at the threshold.

Once viewers walk through the projection gate, the interior space is delimited by a serpentine structure covered with padded screen material. This structure weaves through nine columns, dividing the installation into two cylindrical spaces. Each space displays material from either the V&A or Biennale archives, and is furnished with chairs and futons designed after this archival material. The atmosphere is welcoming. The first space contains a projection depicting fragments from a documentary colour film re-edited from 16mm footage made for the V&A by the BBC in 1978. The documentary captures a group of men in a meeting, discussing an architectural model for an exhibition design. These images are juxtaposed with another set depicting two women adjusting a mannequin in a Victorian dress. The piece portrays the representation of hierarchical and gendered institutional rituals – women are represented as stereotypically feminine, whereas men are presented as authoritative. By contrasting these images, Lewandowska intervenes in historical time to connect with first-generation feminists who demanded equal status within historical narratives.

Elizabeth Freeman explains that historical time represents the progression of time in a chronological order, with years and dates in succession. This order sustains its own narratives and ideologies while reinforcing the idea that those narratives ought to adhere to a sequential structure. Historical time, Freeman explains, confines temporal regulation within a process she describes as 'chrononormativity' (or, the use of time to organize individual human bodies), often in ways associated with masculine power (2010: 3). Under this theoretical framework, *It's About Time* yields out-of-joint moments and refuses adherence to chronological exactitude. By acting anachronistically, the project disrupts the rules of history and resists the values and ideologies dictated by a patriarchal temporal order.

The second space encompasses an audio recording of a debate between six women, along with a video projection of a written transcript of this debate. The transcript can also be read in booklets. The piece takes its point of departure from the Biennale's archive, which documents the meetings held between Venice's civic, intellectual and business leaders establishing the foundations of the Biennale. Once again, this information highlights the ideological apparatus of gender inequality within a male-dominated system. Parallel to these meetings, however, an 1895 discussion led by Felicita Bevilacqua La Masa initiated a critique around the establishment of the exhibition, scrutinizing its public value and asserting the need to support young artists. Based on this material, Lewandowska



*Marysia Lewandowska, It's About Time / Era Ora (2019), installation views in the Applied Arts Pavilion Special Project of the 58th International Art Exhibition – La Biennale di Venezia, with the Victoria and Albert Museum, London. Photos: Andrea Avezzi, Courtesy of La Biennale di Venezia.*

creates a fictitious script between six women, dated to April 1893. The piece portrays a utopian scenario wherein the six female representatives discuss issues regarding the management and administration of the Biennale, and thereby reset its ideological basis. These dialogues indicate communal concern about the uncertainties of that era and imagine the future direction of the Biennale. Within these conversations, some of the committee members illustrate time as 'an open space' or something 'intensely sweet, like a vagina'; they suggest to conceive time as an 'emotional muscle', which is strengthened through images and art.

Lewandowska deploys the archive within a strategy of disruption, recreating a history of the Biennale and reconfiguring the orders imposed by chronological time. She performs the archive as a collective process of re-enactment, opening up a place for conversation, imagination and new possibilities within feminist histories. This idea connects to psychoanalyst and philosopher Julia Kristeva's conception of third-generation feminism, which does not exclude the parallel existence of feminist histories within the same historical time; rather, these histories are interwoven with one another (1981: 33). Time, in *It's About Time*, stretches from a chronological configuration to then contract within an anachronistic temporal model that connects feminist discourses across different eras. Represented and experienced through the aesthetic, intellectual and emotional responses that arise while walking through the exhibition, the archive, thus, becomes an instrument to reformulate time. *It's About Time* stages a place of encounter where feminist histories gain a simultaneous presence through the embodiment of an art experience.

### References

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