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Digital Media at the 2019 Venice Biennale

These days, the term “digital media” is a grab bag of genre-bending techniques, an all-encompassing moniker for works that fail to fit the strictures of more traditional media. *May You Live In Interesting Times* is rife with works of digital media—though their diversity belies easy classification into a single genre. Proposition A at Arsenale alone features, among other digital works, a VR experience (Dominique Gonzalez-Foerster, *Endodrome*), a TV news station comprised of YouTube videos, cellphone footage, and artist-filmed segments (Kahlil Joseph, *BLK NWS*), and a series of interactive video interviews with members of different national militaries (Neil Beloufa, *Global Agreement*). With the technological advances of the 20th and 21st centuries, it is no wonder that the genre of “film” had to expand to “video,” and “video” in turn to “digital media.” And yet, two standout works of digital media in *Interesting Times* belong to these older, narrower genres of film and video. Haris Epaminonda’s *Chimera* (film) and Lawrence Abu Hamdan’s *Walled Unwalled* (video) differ greatly, but they both use the forms and quirks of their specific sub-mediums to more effectively tell their stories. In these works, form and content are harmonious.

Unlike other works of digital media in *Interesting Times*, both *Chimera* and *Walled Unwalled* loosely mimic entertainment cinema in setting and presentation. Both works occupy their own rooms, and both are projected. From here the two works diverge. *Chimera*, which earned Epaminonda the Silver Lion for Promising Young Participant, glows within a black box of a room accessed beyond two blackout curtains. At thirty minutes long, it is a mysterious, nostalgic piece crafted from digitized Super 8 film the artist shot while vacationing continents and years apart. The celluloid film strips lend the video a raw and tactile texture, a far cry from the chrome-smooth worlds of 4K video. The color is rich, flat, and 1970s in its muted jewel tones. As the viewer, you can imagine how this projected image would feel to the touch: velvety, blemished, and worn. Shot by the artist at head height and without a tripod, the image is shaky and appears to be from the viewer’s perspective. You are getting close to statues, backing away, watching the moon rise over the mountains like a giant spherical egg, and driving through Las Vegas. Images are sequenced based on visual resemblance, associations, and rhythms, like the patterns of memory. An image of Egyptian pyramids cuts to a triangular shape in a book, which you recall when later seeing the faux pyramid of Las Vegas’ Luxor Hotel. And there is sound, too. Created with the sound artist Kelly Jayne Jones, the melodies are shimmering, moody, and resonant. In their rise and fall, they both set and respond to the emotional tenor of the visuals.

Walled Unwalled, contrastingly, is sleek. At twenty minutes long, it is a tightly controlled video projected onto a custom-designed glass screen that functions as a see-through wall within the gallery space. Shot in the state-of-the-art Funkhaus sound studio built to broadcast East German radio, the video assumes a quasi-academic format, where Abu Hamdan is the experienced professor linking seemingly disparate events for his audience. The overriding theme of his lecture concerns walls: how they’re not as impervious as we assume, how they can amplify

sound, and how we can thus hear through them. He explores this theme through three real stories of sound: a Syrian prison designed as an auditory panopticon, Oscar Pistorius' shooting of his girlfriend Reeve Steenkamp through their bathroom wall, and the manufacturing of Cold War era radio shows and propaganda within the Funkhaus sound studio. Rather than depict these stories through matching visuals, Abu Hamdan tells them, reading from a script that utilizes witness testimony, legal evidence, and explanations of the physics of sound. These modern stories are accompanied by perfectly low lighting and sharp cuts, keeping the audience's focus on Abu Hamdan's diegetic words rather than distracting visuals. The video's didactic and high tech approach uses sound to prove the power of sound. While straightforward, such a quasi-bureaucratic style is unexpected from an artwork, rendering it both subversive and impactful.

Though both within the realm of digital media, Epaminonda's *Chimera* and Abu Hamdan's *Walled Unwalled* take drastically different approaches to storytelling, including in presentation, sequencing, and the use of sound. And yet, both use the qualities of their sub-medium to their advantage, capitalizing on the frayed and tactile nature of film to construct a hybrid tale of memory and journey, and on the slick, technically-advanced capabilities of modern video to speak to the power of sound and the fallibility of walls.