Press Release

PATRICK STAFF:
ON VENUS
Serpentine Galleries
8 November 2019 – 9 February 2020

Press View: Thursday 7 November, 10am – 12pm
Press images at serpentinegalleries.org/press

The Serpentine has commissioned a major new site-specific exhibition by artist Patrick Staff, (b. 1987, Bognor Regis, UK) opening 8 November 2019. Through a varied and interdisciplinary body of work, the artist interrogates notions of discipline, dissent, labour and queer identity. Drawing from a wide range of sources, Staff cites the ways in which history, technology, capitalism and the law have fundamentally transformed the social constitution of our bodies today, with a focus on gender, debility and biopolitics.
Staff created an ambitious environment, which includes architectural interventions to the gallery building. Altered lighting and flooring create a space that feels at once chemically modified and sensationally charged. A piping network suspended from the ceiling of the gallery slowly leaks natural and synthetic liquids into steel barrels, suggestive of sharing intimate fluids or the trafficking of viruses and data, transforming the gallery into a leaking, rudimentary body. A single gargoyle, weathered by acidic rain, is positioned as a gatekeeper at its entrance.

A series of etchings are stacked and leant against oversized boxes in the first powder room gallery. The works depict a news story that gained traction in British tabloid newspapers throughout 2017 and 2018, claiming convicted murderer Ian Huntley was seeking to undergo sexual reassignment surgery while serving his life sentence. Rumours of Huntley dressing in women’s clothing and requesting to be identified under a new name were incited by these stories. The articles were found to be fabricated some months later and the newspapers that had printed them subsequently ran meagre clarifications, edited pre-existing articles or deleted the reports from their websites. These newspaper headlines, retractions and clarifications are reproduced and etched by Staff onto steel plates. The works highlight the ways in which the media uses cultural anxieties around the lives of incarcerated people, transgender identity and the uses of public spending, to mobilise sexual panic and reinforce social and sexual norms.

A new video work, in the second powder room, consists of two parts: the first is of scratched, warped and overlapping footage connected to the industrial farming of hormonal, reproductive and carnal animal commodities, including urine, semen, meats, skins and furs. Rather than reducing the lived struggles of animals to make anthropocentric claims, Staff displaces this human-centric view and questions the norms, subjectivity and standards by which all ‘others’ are read, measured and controlled, and asks what lives are deemed visible in institutional spaces. The video’s second half describes in text life ‘on venus’, a state imbued with the violence of pressure and heat, destructive winds or the disorientating lapse of day into night. This poem suggests an alternate state of non-life or near-death, a queer state of being that is volatile and in constant metamorphosis.

Together, the works in the exhibition continue Staff’s ongoing examination of the exchange between bodies, ecosystems and institutions, understood radically from a queer and trans perspective.

This commission continues the Serpentine’s ongoing dialogue with Patrick Staff, following their participation in the Serpentine’s Work Marathon (2018), Transformation Marathon (2015) and Serpentine Cinema (2015).

**Patrick Staff** is an artist based in Los Angeles, USA, and London, UK. Their work has been presented internationally, including solo shows at Irish Museum of Modern Art, Dublin (2019); Dundee Contemporary Arts, Dundee (2019); MOCA, Los Angeles (2017); Spike Island, Bristol, UK (2016); and Chisenhale Gallery, London, UK (2015). Recent group exhibitions have included The Body Electric, Walker Art Center, Minneapolis (2019); Made in LA, Hammer Museum, Los Angeles (2018); Trigger, New Museum, New York (2015).
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Press images at serpentinegalleries.org/press
Serpentine Gallery, Kensington Gardens, London W2 3XA
Serpentine Sackler Gallery, West Carriage Drive, Kensington Gardens, London W2 2AR

PATRICK STAFF EXHIBITION SUPPORTED BY

LUMA FOUNDATION

EXHIBITION CIRCLE
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PATRICK STAFF
ON VENUS
Through a varied and interdisciplinary body of work, Patrick Staff interrogates notions of discipline, dissent, labour and queer identity. Drawing on a wide range of sources, the artist cites the ways in which history, technology, capitalism and the law have fundamentally transformed how we define and identify our bodies today, with a particular focus on gender, debility and biopolitics.

*On Venus* presents Staff’s most ambitious work to date: a site-specific installation exploring structural violence, registers of harm and the effects of acid, blood and hormones.

Throughout the spaces of the Serpentine Gallery, Staff initiates a series of architectural interventions. Transforming the gallery into a leaking, rudimentary body, a piping network suspended from the ceiling slowly drips a mixture of natural and synthetic liquids into steel barrels, suggestive of sharing intimate fluids, or the trafficking of viruses and data. Alterations to the lighting, flooring and walls create an environment that feels at once chemically altered and sensorily charged. A single gargoyle, weathered by acid rain, is positioned as gatekeeper to the entrance of the space.

A new series of acid-based intaglio etchings quote from a tabloid news story from 2017 and 2018, claiming that Ian Huntley, a convicted murderer, was seeking to transition from male to female while serving his life sentence. He was rumoured to be dressing in women’s clothing and requesting to be identified under a new
name. After a number of months, however, the articles were exposed as entirely fabricated. The newspapers that had printed the stories variously deleted the reports from their websites, edited pre-existing articles or ran meagre clarifications. Reproducing these retractions and clarifications alongside the original headlines, Staff’s etchings on steel highlight the ways in which the media and society weaponise cultural prejudices and anxieties about the lives of incarcerated people, transgender identity and the uses of public spending to mobilise panic and reinscribe social and sexual norms. The UK has the highest prison population in western Europe, with 18.46% of prisoners in England and Wales housed in private, for-profit prisons. Transgender people – particularly trans women of colour – face disproportionate contact with the criminal justice system and prison industrial complex. Staff’s etchings are stacked in the gallery, leaning against oversized boxes, referring to the original use of the building as a magazine gunpowder storehouse for the landed gentry of eighteenth-century London in case of civil disorder.

A new video work is presented in the second of the former powder rooms. The looping film is comprised of two parts: the first of scratched, warped and overlapping footage connected to the industrial farming of hormonal, reproductive and carnal animal commodities including urine, semen, various meats, skins and furs. Rather than reducing the struggles of animals to anthropocentric
claims, Staff points to the entanglement of species, sex, race and labour in the conditions of capitalism, advocating a reciprocal, constitutive relationship between the contemporary subject and the non-human. The video’s second part comprises a poem describing life on Venus, a state marked by violent pressure and heat, destructive winds and the disorienting lapse of day into night. In its depiction of an alternate condition of non-life or near-death, the poem offers an account of a queer state of being as a volatile concatenation in constant metamorphosis.

*On Venus* continues Staff’s pursuit of an understanding of the exchange between bodies, ecosystems, and institutions from a queer and trans perspective. In combination, the works in the exhibition seek to question the boundaries of the human subject as well as the limits of the institution, understood as a biopolitical tool for privileging a minority in order to dehumanise the many. What bodies are made legible in institutional spaces? What is materialised and dematerialised? What is made livable and unlivable, killable and un-killable?

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**IMPORTANT NOTICE**

The film screened in the gallery contains strong and sensitive material, including footage of industrial animal farming that highlights the abhorrent malpractice that some visitors may find disturbing and is not suitable for children. For more information please talk to a member of our Visitor Services team.

The film contains flashing images.
Biopolitics:
A concept developed by Michel Foucault and used in social theory to examine the strategies and mechanisms through which human life processes are managed under regimes of authority over knowledge, power, and subjecthood.

Queer:
A term used by those wanting to reject specific labels of romantic orientation, sexual orientation and/or gender identity. Also a way of rejecting perceived norms within a LGBTQI community in relation to racism, misogyny, classism, and ableism.

Trans:
An umbrella term to include people who identify as transgender, transexual and other identities where a person does not identify with the gender they were assigned at birth. Used in contrast with cis or cisgender, which refers to someone whose self-identification aligns with their birth-assigned gender.

Debility:
A means of describing and categorising forms of bodily injury, physical difference and social exclusion brought on by economic inequality and political factors.
Prison Industrial Complex:
A term used to describe a system built around and economically driven by mass incarceration and surveillance. It has, and continues, to motivate the rapid expansion of inmate intake, retention, and recidivism as a means of economic gain and societal control.

Anthropocentric:
The viewpoint that considers human beings as the most significant entity in the universe, particularly over nature or animals; the interpreting or regarding the world solely in terms of human values and experiences.
on venus, days outlast years.
LIST OF WORKS

Gargoyle (the throat), 2019
Digital print on PVC, 208 × 60 cm

Acid Rain for Serpentine Sackler Gallery, 2019
Steel drums, galvanised steel pipes and fixtures, mild steel
tanks, fibreglass, acid, various materials, dimension variable

On Living, 2019
Steel plates, fibracolour black MDF, dimensions variable

On Venus, 2019
Single-channel video, colour, sound, Perspex screen,
13 minutes looped

CREDITS

Producer: Hana Cohn
Supervising Sound Editor: Tom Sedgewick
Sound Editor: Ben Hurd
Colourist: Randy Coonfield, Blueline Finishing
Online Editing: Blueline Finishing

Patrick Staff Studio: Hana Cohn
Research Assistance: Gabriella Beckhurst
Etching Fabrication: Ian J. Steadman
Gargoyle Print: Omni
on venus, things are much the same as they are here.
on venus, days outlast years.
on venus, there were once oceans
    that have long since burnt away.
on venus, there are no seasons.
on venus, there is pressure,
    enough pressure to crush absolute.
on venus, the hours between day and night
    are far thinner than here, and lapsing_
on venus, the winds blow harder
    they strip every surface,
the air hostile //
on venus
we are neighbours
in nerves /
on venus, days outlast years.
on venus, there were once oceans that have long since burnt away.
on venus, there are no seasons.
on venus, there is pressure, enough pressure to crush absolute.
on venus, the hours between day and night are far thinner than here, and lapsing-
on venus, the winds blow harder they strip every surface, the air hostile //
on venus

we are neighbours in nerves /
with chemicals
/ with acid
    in our insides
    with muscles
like rats_ and flora
like spiders -- like sex something that looks like sex but isn’t /
    / fucking
    like lava //
like insects
    head underground
like dogs –
    dogs tested on
dogs with guts
full of — something
like wailing /
_ and sobbing
like buildings
door handles made of blood
/ touch and nervous like drugs
— and senses
and change and infirmity and pain
— like suffering
, like sleeping
  no sleeping / like home
and no home like this –
  like — rotation and testes
new ovaries_

new organs
/ like rain

on venus
/ the rain
on venus,
burns away
before it reaches the surface.
the insides
like no insides
,, like new organs
for everyone!
new organs for everyone!
on venus
on venus //
there are no
on venus,
there are no moons.
LIVE PROGRAMMES

SATURDAY TALKS

Saturday 16 November, 3pm
Natalia Grabowska, Assistant Curator

Saturday 8 February, 3pm
Claude Adjil, Curator

BSL interpretation is available upon prior request for all our Saturday Talks. For more information visit: serpentinegalleries.org/bsl

Wednesday 18 December, 6.45 pm
Artists’ Film Club: Patrick Staff
Institute of Contemporary Arts,
Cinema 1, The Mall, St. James's, London SW1Y 5AH

A screening featuring recent work by Patrick Staff in the presence of the artist.

DIGITAL GUIDES

Get closer to the art with the Bloomberg Connects free digital guide by visiting sgtours.org on your mobile device.
READING LIST


Angela Y. Davis, *Are Prisons Obsolete?*, Seven Stories Press, 2011

Byung-Chul Han, *What is Power?*, John Wiley & Sons, 2018


Select titles will be available for purchase in the Serpentine Galleries store.
Patrick Staff: On Venus is curated by
Hans Ulrich Obrist
Artistic Director
Claude Adjil, Curator at Large,
Live Programmes
Natalia Grabowska
Assistant Curator
Mike Gaughan
Gallery Manager
Jo Paton
Chief Producer
Joel Bunn
Installation and Production Manager

Design by:
Turnbull Grey
Print by:
Darwin

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With Koenig Books

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