



Patrick Staff, *On Venus* (installation view)  
(2019–2020). Image courtesy  
of the artist and Serpentine Galleries © 2019.  
Photo: Hugo Glendinning.

# To Crush Absolute

## On Patrick Staff and Destroying the Institution

What is commonly known as Hyde Park—central London’s largest public park—is actually two parks conjoined. To the west, Kensington Gardens contains Kensington Palace, currently home to Britain’s future king and his family, while Hyde Park, to the east, was once Henry VIII’s hunting estate. Both—as with Regent’s Park, Green Park, Richmond Park, and several other of the city’s major green spaces—are officially Royal Parks, which means that the public’s longstanding access to them is courtesy of the monarchy, which nowadays does most of its animal-rearing and animal-killing on more expansive estates further afield.

Kensington Gardens also contains the Serpentine Gallery, where Los Angeles-based, British-born artist Patrick Staff recently presented *On Venus*. This exhibition was specially commissioned for the Serpentine Sackler Gallery, an extension of the original gallery that opened in 2013 in an 1805 gunpowder store and was renovated and expanded by architect Zaha Hadid. It was the young artist’s most significant exhibition to date following their exhibition *Prince of Homburg*, at Dundee Contemporary Arts, Scotland, and the Irish Museum of Modern Art, Dublin, earlier in 2019.

The Serpentine is a non-collecting, kunsthalle-style space which has been free to the public since it opened in 1970; it is a popular destination for weekend park strollers and for the denizens of the affluent neighborhoods that surround it. Despite being considered one of the U.K.’s most progressive art institutions,

last summer it was embroiled in controversy after it was revealed by *The Guardian* that its CEO, Yana Peel, was, along with her husband, a major stakeholder in an Israeli cyberweapons firm. Within a week, Peel had resigned. (Soon after *On Venus* opened to the public, Los Angeles art maven Bettina Korek was announced as Peel’s successor.) Furthermore, in April of last year, exhibiting artist Hito Steyerl spoke out against the institution’s acceptance of (and prominent acknowledgment of) support from the Sackler family, who’ve been called to account due to their ownership of the OxyContin-producing Purdue Pharma. Though the institution is no longer accepting funding from the family, the Sackler name remains on the building.

“The show is a very direct response to being asked to make an exhibition for the Serpentine, which in my mind occupies such a large position in the London—and British, and even European—art consciousness,” Staff told me recently. Given the newly perceived toxicity of the institution, however, the offer was not the straightforward accolade it might once have been. Staff, whose training at London’s Goldsmiths College embedded them in the Marxist, leftist, European intellectual tradition, had previously made work that was critical of both the medical industrial complex and orthodox systems of military, class-based, or penitentiary control. “I needed to accept and acknowledge the complicity of making a show there, but then also find a way to act within that.”

*On Venus* was comprised, essentially, of three distinct though interrelated installations. With *Acid Rain for Serpentine Sackler Gallery* (all works 2019), Staff transformed the building—and by implication the institution it houses—into an ecosystem and a body, with veins in the form of steel pipes fixed to its walls and ceilings that dripped a mysterious acidic liquid into steel barrels, from whence it evaporated back into the atmosphere. Mirrored laminate covered the gallery floors and colored gels rendered the



Patrick Staff, *Public Drunk* (2018). Oasis water fountain, water, pump, vinyl tubing, aluminum bucket, PVC pipe, chain, plastic sheet, sock, snail shells, temporary tattoos, tape, 44.5 x 17 x 18 inches. Image courtesy of the artist and Commonwealth and Council, Los Angeles. Photo: Ruben Diaz.

space a sickly yellow, leaving the viewer with the—not unpleasant—sensation of floating in piss.

A photograph of an eroded church gargoyle welcomes visitors to *On Venus*, recalling the damage that acid rain does to limestone and marble—materials often used in the construction of civic buildings. Staff explains: “You realize that what was really coming under threat (in the U.K. at least) were churches, banks, museums, prisons. On the one hand, I’m trying to grapple with the erosion of public institutions, but maybe also reveling in the ecstasy of these melting walls, ceilings leaking acid, maybe destroying the Serpentine altogether.”

If *Acid Rain for Serpentine Sackler Gallery* transformed the building into a poisoned (or maybe medicated) body sustained by jerry-rigged pipework and pumps, what was the nature of its malady? The notion that the institution depended on the recycling of a toxic substance was deliciously appealing, given that its major funder’s fortune was partly made from an addictive opioid. But for Staff, who identifies as non-binary, the body supported by a pharmaceutical regime also suggests affinities with the trans body. In past works, the artist has regularly described states in which the dichotomy of health versus debility is impossible to parse. In the video *Weed Killer* (2017), for example, the protagonist describes the life-saving but devastating effects of chemotherapy; in Staff’s 16mm film *depollute* (2018), the gruesome surgical technique of removing one’s own testicles is reframed by its title as a cleansing, restorative, and even emancipatory action. Staff says that gender dysmorphia is “the main way I interface with the world.” In *On Venus*, the dysmorphic body was evoked by a space that felt discombobulating and unnatural.

Encased within the Serpentine Sackler Gallery are two brick-walled spaces, relics of the armory’s original architecture known institutionally as the Powder Rooms. In the first, Staff’s installation *On Living* drew on a story published in April 2018 by British tabloid

*The Daily Star* (and recycled by other newspapers) which alleged that the notorious child murderer Ian Huntley was seeking to transition from male to female while in prison. “Soham beast Huntley,” shrieked the paper, “seeks sex swap on tax payer.” The virulently transphobic—and baldly fabricated—story was later quietly retracted. Staff etched both the original articles and their retractions (using another, much stronger kind of acid) into steel plates that were mounted on large grey boxes in the darkened space.

In the second Powder Room, Staff projected the title video *On Venus*, a collage of abstracted footage showing various forms of industrial farming, from the milking of cows to the collection of urine from pregnant female horses—the latter of which is used in the manufacture of the estrogen-replacement drug Premarin. The film crescendos through increasingly unwatchable forms of animal cruelty, progressing from slaughterhouses to the skinning of live raccoons and snakes. Mercifully, it eventually segues into a poem by the artist describing the condition of living on Venus where “there is pressure / enough pressure to crush absolute.”

Another metaphor in the exhibition for what Staff describes as “a kind of ambient pressure, ambient violence” is acid rain, which hasn’t been high on our growing list of environmental crises for over a quarter of a century. Staff explains, “I remember as a kid thinking if I went out in the rain it would burn my skin, that I’d melt like in a horror movie. But then learning that it wasn’t as direct as that, that it was more complicated, more structural.” Staff has created enveloping systems that imply the threat of physical harm in past installations too. The presence of acid in the pipes around the gallery is akin to the vicious security spikes installed around the walls of Staff’s recent exhibition *Prince of Homburg*, where it was not clear whether viewers were being kept in or out (out of what?), and whether they were being protected or controlled. Staff’s assignment of

meaning to symbols is always multi-layered, inconstant, and subject to reversal. In *hatefull to the stomach, harmefull to the braine*, a 2018 exhibition at Commonwealth and Council, Staff presented several sculptures incorporating public drinking fountains that recycled water in self-evidently closed systems, undoing the fountains' typical association with good health by introducing the possibility of pollution, toxicity, or, in the case of one work, *Public Drunk* (2018), messy inebriation—a state that Staff associates with a queer mode of being.

Throughout the Serpentine show, Staff challenges viewers to wrestle with ideas that are contradictory, confusing, and uncomfortable. Taken together, the three parts of the exhibition seem to dangle some simplifying analogies (the institution as a body; the animal body as an incarcerated body; the trans body as an incarcerated body; the trans body as an animal body). But these connective themes soon start to fissure and splinter apart. That's intentional. "The assumption that I'm making a point about whether it's good or bad to kill animals, or whether Huntley is a victim or not, says something about what we think artists do—particularly those who are seen as other in some way—what we think my, their, or our art does, what the museums do who show that work, what we think we're getting out of engaging with culture." (When I ask if Staff is vegan, they laugh and say that everyone asks them the same question. They are not.)

Staff makes us aware that so much of our interpretation of contemporary art is based on the decoding of analogies in order to arrive at the moral position that we guess the artist—and by extension the institution—is advocating. But here, that doesn't work. Animal cruelty is abhorrent—but what about if it helps trans people self-actualize with drugs like Premarin? Why is animal cruelty unbearable to witness, but human cruelty sells newspapers? As Staff puts it: "The difficulty of being asked to have compassion for someone who is positioned as being

beyond compassion," or "asking when we're okay with violence and when we're not okay with violence. Whether certain images, certain models, for killing are tolerable while others are not."

The questions that challenge us, the viewers, also challenge Staff; the artist scorns what they describe as "most artists' obsessive relationship to their own individualism—myself included!" As a trans person, Staff is expected (by the public, by the host institution) to deliver some kind of message derived from—or likely *about*—their exceptional experience of the world. "That is about how museums and institutions package the lives of trans people," they say. It might be tempting to assume that trans issues figure as the connective tissue of the exhibition. But in equal measure the show engages with incarceration, animal rights, biopolitics, environmentalism, austerity politics, social and structural violence—all wrapped up in a critique of the function and limitations of the institution itself. Staff says they are ultimately most interested in creating situations in which the artist and the viewer "go somewhere together"—even though Staff immediately confesses that they are "repulsed" by the phrase's implied optimism in the art-making process and its promise of a clear destination.

The comforts of civic beneficence, of class, of criminal justice, of public health, of human sovereignty over the natural world, and of the improving effects of culture: all are Victorian principles that anachronistically endure even in the most seemingly enlightened institutions. While Staff's first anarchic impulse might be to tear the entire system down and start from scratch, through their varied and thoughtful artwork of the past 10 years or so, they have tended not to outwardly attack, but to inwardly complicate: to revel and rejoice in moral ambiguity and the collapse of logic. Many aspects of *On Venus*—the acid, the excruciating footage of animal cruelty, the citations of media transphobia—might seem like incendiary devices deployed with transformative intent. What one leaves

the exhibition with, however, is a sense of how issues are enmeshed within broader structural problems. What more poignant example than the Serpentine itself: a free public institution on royal land, supported by the financial spoils of past and present violence and exploitation, hosting artworks that suggest the possibility, at least, of its own destruction but through which it paradoxically becomes more prestigious, and therefore more stable and secure as a consequence? Staff gives the example of science, which might seem to offer a totalizing explanation of the world, but “the deeper you dig into it, the more you try to understand it, the less sense it makes. That is such a relief to me. Because my experience of the world is not binary, not coherent.”

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