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The DISASTER ARTIST

Australia's pavilion at the Venice Biennale is loud, confronting and has been years in the making for noise-musician Marco Fusinato, whose live, improvised performances will stretch for 200 days, writes **Jane Cornwell**

It's the opening week of the 2022 Venice Biennale – that pre-eminent international celebration of art and architecture – and inside a mysterious black cube looming over a canal, within gardens dappled with sunlight and dotted with bridges, walkways and 28 other country-focused pavilions, discord is being sown.

Kerrang, goes an electric guitar, off-kilter and ultra loud. Shrieking. Howling. Threatening eardrums. Snaking through layers of swampy feedback. Just feel something, it seems to urge. We are all going to die. Feel, before it's too late.

An audience of assorted hoi polloi stand goggle-eyed before floor-to-ceiling LED screens, onto which are projected a deluge of mostly grim black-and-white images: maggots, faeces, a vomiting cat. Forked lightning, medieval etchings of plague-struck bodies, a modern-day black bloc protester throwing a rock. The sudden glimpse of a dragonfly resting on a flower is so irrationally beautiful that it, too, feels messed up.

The slideshow proceeds relentlessly, lingering on an image here, flurrying through dozens of images there, some of them underdeveloped, overexposed, superimposed or blurry after being snapped with a smart phone. Each has been printed onto sheet music paper – a series of five horizontal lines – so that while randomly computer generated, when taken together the images form a score.

The noise is intense, visceral. A small Renaissance painting of a decomposing decapitated head balanced atop a red leather-bound book is propped against a stack of amps. We stand there, assaulted, trying to take it in: the radiant light and deluge of internet-sourced imagery, the thick, low vibrations carving the air. The head.

The title of the work: Desastres. Disasters.

As spectacles go it is hallucinatory, nauseating, exhausting. I sit on the floor, which helps. Eventually there's a sense of purging and catharsis, a few prickles of elation.

The man responsible is present, sitting on an amp case with his back to the crowd and new work boot operating a trigger pedal, a silver aluminium guitar hanging around his neck like a talisman. He is Marco Fusinato – noise-musician, contemporary artist and Australia's 41st representative at this 59th Venice Biennale.

Each working day, for the entire 200 days of the Biennale, he will be fronting up, turning around, sitting down and improvising, loud.

"This idea of triggering images at great speed with sound began years ago," he'd said moments before, standing at a lectern on the patio of the Australian pavilion (conceptualised by

Melbourne architects Denton Corker Marshall as a white box within a black box). "To bring this wild project to Venice, to get it up the canal, for it to be everything I imagined and wanted, is a really big deal."

Desastres is presented by the Australia Council for the Arts with financial aid from a long list of private donors. Their names are printed on the wall at the pavilion's entry/exit in a small, neat font: among them, Janet Holmes á Court, the Blanchett/Upton family, Malcolm and Lucy Turnbull. The Australia Council helpfully describes the work as "a culmination of Fusinato's interests in experimental music, underground culture, mass media and art history" and a piece that "explores topics of labour, perseverance and absenteeism through his ongoing presence (and absence) in the space".

Which may be so. But what Desastres really means, says Alexie Glass-Kantor, executive director of Artspace, Sydney and the project's dynamic curator, is down to the subjective personal experiences and emotional responses of the audience.

Most of who, by the end of this first performance, have left.

"I get so absorbed in the sound and images that I'm oblivious to what is going on," says Fusinato, 57, when asked if he's bothered that A. the crowd thinned right out, and conversely B. that several fanboys came and stood in front of him, filming.

"It's a feedback loop." He shrugs. "Those images I use have been downloaded or rephotographed and put back into the world. Then they're photographed all over again to go onto social media or into dot files or whatever. In, out, the spew of the world."

He smiles. "But yeah, I did give the finger to one guy who put his camera in my face."

We're downstairs inside the austere two-storey pavilion, in a makeshift green room. Melbourne-based sound designer Nick Roux – one of several technicians crucial to the project – is nearby, tinkering with some equipment. Fusinato's street-wear, which is virtually identical to the new "uniform" he wears when performing (baggy denim jeans, engineer work boots, custom-made charcoal Jac + Jack shirt), is bundled on a chair. Packets of guitar strings of varying thickness are arranged on the floor.

Through the window, across the Rio del Giardino canal, the queue for the Greek pavilion (in which a modern VR film retells Sophocles' Oedipus using amateur Roma actors) stretches back through the Biennale's gardens, past Romania and Poland, and almost to the Brazilian pavilion, which is entered through a door in the shape of an ear. Being included in the Venice Biennale is a big deal. But this year, with the Biennale

having been postponed by a year because of the pandemic, it is more so.

Soft-spoken and considered, Fusinato is remarkably laid-back for one whose influences variously include anarchism, Marxism, situationism, Italian film director Pier Paolo Pasolini, the work of 18th-century Spanish painter and printmaker Francisco de Goya and such abrasive music subgenres as grindcore, hardcore punk and doom metal – particularly when wielded by cult Japanese band Corrupted, whose lyrics, graphic design and track titles are, for whatever reason, all in Spanish.

Fusinato is pleased with the way his performance went. Not that it matters: "I'm aware that my references are pretty oblique, marginal, unpopular. And I have no expectation that what I do will be 'liked', so I'm never disappointed," he has said.

Once upon a time he might have cared what people thought, especially when he was touring the world just to play for a half-hour at one venue. But since his durational noise-guitar performances are conceptual rather than technical – he doesn't "play" the instrument he calls "capitalism's entertainment tool" in the conventional sense – he has developed his own language, and enthusiastically embraced his limitations.

The right-to-fail clause embedded within experimental art practice is central to Fusinato's oeuvre. His canon spans everything from sculpture, photography and screen printing to Spectral Arrows, an ongoing series of pieces for guitar and mass amplification, and Constellations, in which visitors got to smash a gallery wall with a baseball bat. All of his projects are interrelated. All deal with the tensions sparked by opposing forces: noise/silence, order/disorder, underground/institutions.

Polarisation is a given. For every Washington Post – which will deem the Australian pavilion one of the three best pavilions in the Biennale – there is an Art in America. "The sound was so ear-splittingly loud that I only lasted a minute," opined their critic of Desastres. "At least the gallery assistants had noise-cancelling ear phones."

Fusinato has form at Venice, having taken part in a group show at the Biennale's other major space, the Arsenale, in 2015. His piece, From the Horde to The Bee, positioned books containing scanned copies of resources from Milan's ultra-radical Primo Moroni Archive around a table and asked punters to place cash donations in the middle. At the end of the Biennale, the money pile, unpilfered, was stuffed into a green garbage bag and donated to the archive's impoverished squatters, with whom Fusinato shared a boozy night on the tiles.