

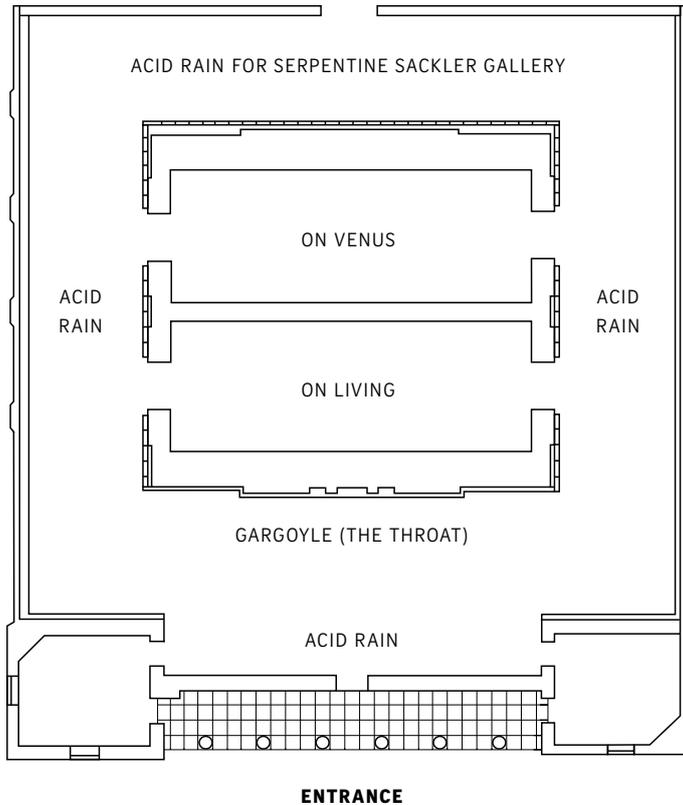
# PATRICK STAFF

ON VENUS

8 November 2019 \_\_\_\_\_ 9 February 2020

# **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?

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 (2016); and Chisenhale Gallery, London (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).

## 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.**

## ON VENUS GLOSSARY OF TERMS

### 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.

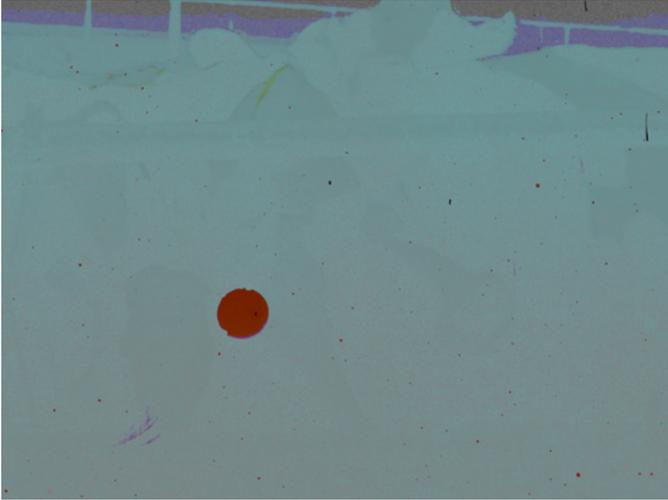
### **Anthropocentric:**

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.











All images:  
*On Venus*, 2019  
Courtesy of the artist  
and Commonwealth and Council  
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## 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

## PATRICK STAFF

ON VENUS

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 /

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](http://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.

**Friday, 7 February, 7pm**

The Sky is a Genius

An evening of poetry readings with Bhanu Kapil, Precious Okoyomon, Nisha Ramayya and Patrick Staff.

## READING LIST

Sara Ahmed, *Willful Subjects*, Duke University Press, 2014

Lauren Berlant, *Cruel Optimism*, Duke University Press, 2011

Mel Y. Chen, *Animacies: Biopolitics, Racial Mattering, and Queer Affect*, Duke University Press, 2012

Ed Cohen, *A Body Worth Defending: Immunity, Biopolitics, and the Apotheosis of the Modern Body*, Duke University Press, 2009

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

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

Eugène Ionesco, *Rhinoceros*, in *Rhinoceros, The Chairs, The Lesson*, Penguin, 2000

Bhanu Kapil, *Humanimal: A Project for Future Children*, Kelsey Street Press, 2009

Jasbir Puar, *The Right to Maim: Debility, Capacity, Disability*, Duke University Press, 2017

Nicole Shukin, *Animal Capital: Rendering Life in Biopolitical Times*, University of Minnesota Press, 2009

Nat Smith, Eric A. Stanley, *Captive Genders: Trans Embodiment and the Prison Industrial Complex*, AK Press, 2011

Eduardo Viveiros de Castro, *Cannibal Metaphysics*, University of Minnesota Press, 2015

TSQ Journal: *Tranimalities*, Volume 2, Issue 2, ed. Eva Hayward, Jami Weinstein, Duke University Press, 2015

Select titles will be available for purchase in the Serpentine Galleries store.

## DIGITAL GUIDES

Get closer to the art with the Bloomberg Connects free digital guide by visiting [sgtours.org](http://sgtours.org) on your mobile device.

*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

Serpentine Galleries  
+44 (0)20 7402 6075  
serpentinegalleries.org  
information@serpentinegalleries.org

Facebook: Serpentine Galleries  
Twitter: @serpentineuk  
Instagram: serpentineuk  
Pinterest: serpentineuk

Serpentine Gallery  
Kensington Gardens  
London W2 3XA  
With Koenig Books

Serpentine Sackler Gallery  
West Carriage Drive  
London W2 2AR

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PATRICK STAFF EXHIBITION  
SUPPORTED BY

**L U M A**  
**F O U N D A T I O N**

EXHIBITION CIRCLE

Shane Akeroyd  
Sarah Arison

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