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“Monte di Pietà” at the Prada Foundation is stuffed with ordinary items. This sprawling, multilayered project by the Swiss-born artist Christoph Büchel is the most talked about show in Venice.

# A Pawnshop? No, an Artwork.

By SCOTT REYBURN  
Photographs by MATTEO de MAYDA

VENICE — Ascending the grand marble staircase in the center of the Venetian palazzo here, you encounter a selection of fake Gucci, Hermès and other luxury handbags laid out on a blanket. A street hawker seems to have been disturbed, leaving his knockoff wares behind.

Then, turning right on the mezzanine lev-

Christoph Büchel’s vast installation in Venice is compelling, obsessive and sometimes hilarious.

el, you climb another staircase into a control room. Live CCTV monitors flicker above an empty office chair and espresso-stained plastic coffee cup.

Next, a room for cryptocurrency traders with whirring servers, and a fridge, quarter-filled with tins of Red Bull; followed by

the recording studio of a TikTok influencer; a washroom with a print of Leonardo da Vinci’s \$450.3 million “Salvator Mundi” pasted to the wall; a 1950s-style cocktail bar; a pole-dancing den; a kitchen filled with untouched trash. Room after room looks recently abandoned.

These are just a few of the many elements of “Monte di Pietà,” a sprawling, multilayered project by the Swiss-born artist Christoph Büchel, 57, at the Prada Foundation in Venice through Nov. 24. Though not part of the official Biennale, this is the most talked about art project here, compelling in its obsessive, allusive and sometimes hilarious attention to detail. Never shy of taking on big subjects, Büchel has created an im-

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JON CARAMANICA  
MUSIC REVIEW

# Even the Same Old Stories Can Be Superb

At the Stratford Festival, bingeing on seven plays on four stages in five days.

STRATFORD, ONTARIO — Walking the streets of this almost-too-charming town along the I-kid-you-not Avon River, I’ve often had the experience of hearing voices in my head.

I am but mad north-northwest, as Hamlet would have it. After all, at the Stratford Festival, 400 miles in that direction from my usual haunts, internal voices are utterly normal, the result of seeing, cheek by jowl, so many new productions. After you see two or three, they start a conversation, sometimes delighting in what they have in common and sometimes arguing about what they don’t.

During a visit in July, those voices were louder than ever. The five plays and two musicals I caught in five days on four stages were not just conversing but collaborating, seeming to scribble in one another’s scripts. “Twelfth Night” wrote part of “La Cage aux Folles.” “Something Rotten” cribbed “Romeo and Juliet.” “Hedda Gabler” and “The Goat” drank from the same bloody fountain.

And “Cymbeline”? Well, that little-loved Shakespeare once again proved to be mad on its own.

The clash and coupling of such seemingly different works is the great value, and great pleasure, of the repertory system, one so

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Mark Uhre, center left, and Dan Chameroy, center right, in “Something Rotten” at the Stratford Festival in Ontario.

# Hip-Hop Fantasia Takes Over

An exhilarating display of theatrical and visual ambition.

IT’S NEARLY IMPOSSIBLE to fathom that until this summer, almost three decades into her career, Missy Elliott had never headlined an arena tour. One of the most influential hip-hop and pop performers, songwriters and producers of all time, she built a ca-

**Out of This World — the Missy Elliott Experience**  
Touring North America

reer on hyperreal imagery and music that suggested an intergalactic, quirky, sensual future that even now feels fanciful and far-off.

And judging by the performance Elliott, 53, delivered at Barclays Center in Brooklyn on Monday night, it would have been impossible to ascertain that she’d never toured at this level before. The deftness and imagination on display suggested a performer with a hyperdeveloped sense of image-making, a bone-deep understanding of

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PHOTOGRAPHS BY MATTEO de MAYDA



# A Pawnshop? No, an Artwork.



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mersive environment that asks awkward, urgent questions about what capitalism is doing to society and the planet.

To achieve this, the artist transformed the first three floors of Ca' Corner della Regina, an 18th-century palace owned by the Prada Foundation, into the location for a fictional liquidation auction of a bankrupt Venice Pawn Shop. From 1834 to 1969, the palazzo, overlooking the Grand Canal, was home to the Mount of Piety, a Roman Catholic institution that made loans to low-income borrowers who offered their valuables as collateral.

Büchel has imagined this lending facility as if it has just gone bust. The borrowers' deposited belongings are up for auction and the palazzo is boarded up and covered with for-sale signs. The property is a "great investment opportunity," according to the deadpan accompanying brochure, styled like a bankruptcy court auction catalog.

Büchel does not give media interviews. But the material he has chosen for this project has plenty to say about our troubled world and the roles that capital, debt, spurious notions of value and naked greed have played through the centuries.

Jarring juxtapositions of objects are everywhere. An entire room full of bound banking records, dating to the 16th century, is next to a job lot of washing machines and dryers. An authentic 1542 Titian portrait, from the Uffizi Gallery in Florence, hangs on a pegboard panel beside a plastic coat hanger.

Büchel's ongoing work "The Diamond Maker," consisting of a suitcase filled with a collection of lab-grown diamonds made out of his own destroyed art, is displayed near six original tins of Piero Manzoni's 1961 masterwork, "Merda d'Artista." An 18th-century map of Ukraine hangs next to assault rifles.

A Lehman Brothers sign stands on its side behind a screen indicating the current state of world debt (currently more than \$72 trillion, according to Worlddebtclocks.com). An official portrait of a smiling Prime Minister Giorgia Meloni of Italy is placed on a cardboard box next to the ground floor restrooms. A palace, owned by one of the world's most powerful luxury fashion brands, is filled with the thrift store smell of old clothes.

In the current economic climate, it is difficult to imagine a publicly funded museum having the resources to mount this kind of exhibition. Chiara Costa, the head of programs at the Prada Foundation, said in an email that her team had spent two years working with Büchel to research and produce this project.

Over the last 30 years, the Foundation has often commissioned "utopian projects that are seemingly impossible to realize," according to Costa. "Monte di Pietà" pushes this mission even further, since "Büchel's work tends to force the limits of an art institution," she added, referring to the daunting challenges posed by the artist's notoriously ambitious and provocative installations.

Unlike Büchel's more ill-fated projects — including the unrealized "Training Ground for Democracy," a would-be dystopian American town that almost bankrupted the Massachusetts Museum of Contemporary Art before it was canceled in 2007 — "Monte di Pietà" is a focused response to a specific building in a location with specific issues.

One response to these local issues is a cryptocurrency Büchel has created for the project, called the Schei, which is only available to Venice's ever-diminishing local population. Residents can take 100,000 of these tokens free of charge and trade them; any value created by selling them will be "re-invested into initiatives to benefit citizens and residents of Venice," according to the token's website. (Etherscan, which tracks the trade in crypto tokens, has so far recorded just a tiny handful of transactions.)

Back in the project space, a video shows the hapless TikTok "granfluencer" Regina de' Schei trying and failing to buy a glass of Prosecco with her crypto tokens.

What all this adds up to is every visitor's guess. Of course, the auction scheduled in the catalog for Nov. 25 will not take place. It is a fiction: The project will simply close. The borrowed artworks will be returned to their lenders and most of the other materials will return to charity shops, according to Costa from the Prada Foundation.

The Palazzo Ca' Corner della Regina will not be sold. The foundation will reopen the space with another spectacular contemporary art exhibition. Millions of tourists will continue to crowd into Venice. But the wider sense of bankruptcy that Büchel so powerfully articulated won't go away.

**Not part of the Venice Biennale, but still a focused show and the talk of the town.**



Above, a pole-dancing room. Above that, an exhibit is meant to look like an ordinary bathroom, but one that includes a print of Leonardo da Vinci's \$450.3 million "Salvator Mundi" on the wall.



Top row: Purses, monitors, washing machines and guns are among the exhibits in “Monte di Pietà,” Christoph Büchel’s show at the Prada Foundation in Venice. Above center, piles of clothes and other items at Ca’ Corner della Regina, an 18th-century palace turned into the location for a fictional liquidation auction. Above, from left: a portrait of Giorgia Meloni, prime minister of Italy, tucked away by a door; a space made to look like a recording studio.