

Editorial

The proliferation of Biennials around the world, and more generally of collective and themed contemporary art exhibitions, has progressively established a canon that the Venice Biennale does not escape. At least in the section curated by the artistic director, the rule seems evident: they decide on an exhibition style, based on a selection of artists chosen according to a theme, and suggest preferences in the type of display, the arrangements animated by relationships between the works, in relation to the venues and while taking into account the possible response of the audience. Despite attempts to break away from this established syntax, for example by multiplying exhibition venues¹ or setting up performances, public programmes, and ephemeral works, the Venetian exhibition remains ensnared in a format that delegates a vast authorial and directorial role to the artistic director and has long struggled to be truly innovative: although responsive to changes and able to adapt, the Biennale nevertheless follows a curatorial trend that has been asserting itself internationally since the late 1960s.

However, each time, the Venice Biennale has the opportunity to escape a uniform authorial voice through the diversity represented by National Pavilions. Established in 1907 and therefore not conceived at the end of the 19th century as an integral part of the exhibition project,² clearly inspired by the structures dedicated to nations in international commercial Expos,³ Pavilions first developed as cultural and diplomatic branches of certain countries within the Euro-American context, and then gradually emerged as a platform for the presentation of national cultural trends often peripheral to Western geopolitical centres.⁴

The multiplication of pavilions and collateral events today offers an often surprising critical-curatorial openness and a more radical approach compared to the central exhibition. However, it must be noted that the national pavilion structure of the Venice Biennale has been the subject of diverse criticism for its alleged lack of transnational spirit. It is evident, in fact, that its inception was informed by a 19th-century idea of Nation and therefore little inclined, at least

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Paradigmatic was the proliferation of venues throughout the lagoon city desired by Achille Bonito Oliva for the 1993 iteration, or the choice of Palazzo Grassi for the central exhibition by Jean Clair in 1995. It must be said that since 1999, when the Arsenale has been increasingly taken over by the exhibition, escapes from the spaces of the Castello (the Giardini and the Arsenale) have become infrequent.

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The pavilions that have been built in the Giardini di Castello are only a fraction of those found in the Arsenale or that take place in rented venues in the city. It is interesting to note, however, that in the Giardini there has been a rush towards high tenor or signature architecture. On the Biennale website the list of pavilions is accompanied by the name of each architect. Cf. www.labiennale.org last accessed November 2024: 1907 Belgio (Léon Sneyens); 1909 Ungheria (Géza Rintel Maróti); 1909 Germany (Daniele Donghi), demolished and rebuilt in 1938 (Ernst Haiger); 1909 Great Britain (Edwin Alfred Rickards); 1912 France (Umberto Biondo); 1912 Holland (Gustav Ferdinand Boberg), demolished and rebuilt in 1953 (Gerrit Thomas Rietveld); 1914 Russia (Aleksij V. Scusev); 1922 Spain (Javier De Luque) the front was redesigned in 1952 by Joaquin Vaquero Palacios; 1926 Czechoslovakia (Otakar Novotny); 1930 United States (Chester Holmes Aldrich and William Adams Delano); 1932 Denmark (Carl Brummer) enlarged in 1958 by Peter Koch; 1932 Padiglione Venezia (Brenno Del Giudice), enlarged in 1938; 1934 Austria (Josef Hoffmann); 1934 Greece (M. Papandréou – Brenno Del Giudice); 1952 Israel (Zeev Rechter); 1952 Switzerland (Bruno Giacometti); 1954 Venezuela (Carlo Scarpa); 1956 Giappone (Takamasa Yoshizaka); 1956 Finland (Alvar Aalto); 1958 Canada (Gruppo BBPR, Gian Luigi Banfi, Ludovico Barbiano di Belgiojoso, Enrico Peressutti, Ernesto Nathan Rogers); 1960 Uruguay; 1962 Paesi Nordici: Sweden, Norway, Finland (Sverre Fehn); 1964 Brazil (Amerigo Marchesin); 1987 Australia (Philip Cox), rebuilt in 2015 (Denton Corker Marshall); 1995 South Korea (Seok Chul Kim and Franco Mancuso).

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Caroline A. Jones, *The Global Work of Art: World's Fairs, Biennials, and the Aesthetic of Experience* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2016), 107.

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Stephen Naylor, *The Venice Biennale and the Asia-Pacific in the Global Art World* (London: Routledge, 2020)

in principle, to the notion of the exhibition space as a place of intersections and confrontations, one not aimed at rivalry but at cooperation. It is often overlooked that the pavilions have hosted artists from nations other than that of the hosting country, and a precise history in this regard is still to be developed. Secondly, many have viewed the growth of the pavilions as a fracturing of the central structure and thus also of the main statements proposed by the artistic direction. Critiques in this sense came from both outside and within the Biennale itself, starting with Lawrence Alloway's famous definition of a "cellular"⁵ exhibition, where the term was intended negatively, as implying a loss of focus and lack of incisiveness to the message. From this criticism, expressed in various ways, arose numerous instances in which, during attempts at reform, efforts were made to diminish the significance of the pavilions by subjecting them to central governance.⁶ It is a fact that the pavilions have proven to be a source of rebellion against the most established exhibition format, and in some way, the suspicion surrounding them is likely to endure.⁷

However, we must not forget that on a practical level, the national pavilions bring many practical benefits to the Biennial, which makes their abolishment difficult to imagine. To give but one example, they greatly enrich both the number of works and the budget of the Biennial. It is worth noting that the property and management costs (i.e. building construction, maintenance, and exhibition setup) are borne by the foreign countries they represent while the ownership of the land on which they stand remains municipal. If they are not among those in the Giardini, countries are responsible for renting different spaces in the city and for transporting and installing the works. It is quite obvious that this co-ownership has produced many lights and shadows, and with few exceptions—São Paulo, Brazil until 2006, being one—no other biennial has deemed it worth imitating such exhibition practice.

It is not surprising, therefore, that studies of the national pavilions have long been frozen in a kind of tacit and unanimous condemnation. Critical positions on what national exhibitions represent—colonialism, chauvinism, institutional control, international political confrontations—have prevented scholars from addressing the complexity of an exhibition space like that of the Venice Biennale, which encompasses more than 60 to 100 exhibitions every two years.

With the 2000s, when the Biennale systematically expanded beyond the Giardini in the city,⁸ allowing more countries to have their own national pavilions, scholarly studies began to flourish. While some accounts were written earlier, they were sporadic, and there remains a need for more comprehensive analyses. With notable exceptions, such as the Austrian Pavilion in 1993,⁹ the histories written for these occasions largely reflect the need for countries to celebrate their presence in Venice, often on the occasion of anniversaries.

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Lawrence Alloway, *The Venice Biennale 1985-1968, From Salon to Goldfish Bowl* (New York: New York Graphic Society, 1968), 153.

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See Federica Martini and Vittoria Martini, *Just Another Exhibition - Storie e politiche delle Biennali* (Milan: Postmediabooks, 2011), 27-129; Clarissa Ricci, "From Obsolete to Contemporary: National Pavilions and the Venice Biennale", *Journal of Curatorial Studies* 9, no. 1 (2020): 8-39.

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Angela Vettese, "The National Pavilions at the Venice Biennale as a Form of Public Space", in Gediminas Urbonas, Ann Lui, Lucas Freeman (eds.), *Public Space? Lost and Found* (Cambridge: SA+P Press, MIT School of Architecture and Planning, 2017), 211-221.

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The first episodes of the Biennale's expansion outside the Giardini took place in the 1970s, but after the 1993 iteration, when the artistic director wanted to expand the exhibition outside the Giardini, the Biennale began the practice of allowing a country to exhibit as a national pavilion even if it lacked a dedicated space in the Giardini. After 1995, the practice of renting space for collateral events and pavilions was encouraged. Ricci Clarissa, "Venezia e L'arte. La Biennale a Mosaico", in Marco Ballarin and Daniela Ruggeri (eds.), *Venezia. Città sostenibile* (Venezia: Wa.Ve. 2019, Anteferma edizioni luav, 2020), 122-133.

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Peter Weibel "The Transnational Pavilion" in Andrea Fraser, Christian Philipp Müller, Gerwald Rockenschau (eds.), *Österreichs Beitrag zur 45. Biennale von Venedig 1993 = Austrian contribution to the 45th Biennale of Venice 1993 = Il contributo austriaco alla 45a Biennale di Venezia 1993*, (Wien Bundesministerium für Unterricht und Kunst, 1993), 7-20.

The primary aim of *OBOE*'s fifth issue is, in this context, to stimulate studies on National Pavilions. The contributions collected here provide evidence of the ongoing work surrounding this theme. In contrast to the episodic nature of existing analyses, what follows includes some rather exhaustive examples. Moreover, behind each specific discussion lie the geneses of particular problems expanding beyond those mentioned above.

With the call for papers for this issue, the aim was twofold: first, to gauge scholarly interest in the topic, and second, to establish a research platform for identifying strands, patterns, questions, and methodological challenges in the study of National Pavilions. The broad response not only confirmed the interest in the theme, but also helped identify certain consistencies, such as the focus on the pavilion format and the conditions necessary for its realisation.

And, if today, the most pressing issue is precisely that of breaking free from established rules in display, as well as from the traditional concept of the contemporary art exhibition, in terms of criteria, temporality, and locations, it is noteworthy how the Pavilions have also served as unique platforms to spotlight critical intersections of history, both artistic and geopolitical. In her paper, Laura Moure Cecchini recalls the time of the Maraini Biennials and the effort to include as many international participants as possible in the exhibition since 1932. Maraini, as extraordinary commissioner, and thus the architect of several major orientations, observed how Mussolini himself wished to see Venice and the Biennale as “a Geneva for international contemporary art”, laying the foundations for the diplomatic functions of the exhibition, not dissimilar to those of other international events, such as sporting or commercial ones.

However, the challenges of bringing these peaceful and pluralistic intentions into the pavilions of countries with complex and troubled internal politics, especially if the initial idea was to gather a certain group to represent a linguistic and geographical community in the Giardini, becomes clear in the essay dedicated to the history of a never-constructed pavilion for Latin America, as traced by Anita Ortez. Even more historically charged difficulties underpinned the representation of areas that had experienced recent colonisation and decolonisation, such as those formerly part of the British Empire. Even now, for example, India has had only one representation at the Biennale, in a room at Giudecca where Nalini Malani exhibited in 2005. Meanwhile, even Great Britain struggled to navigate self-representation as just one European country among others. Claudia Di Tosto recounts in these pages the tortuous post-imperial background of the British Pavilion at the first Biennale after World War II, that of 1948. Meanwhile, Stuart McDonald's essay, which reports on research into the role of the British Council as co-organiser of British participation since the 1930s, highlights how inclusion and redefinition have extended to the recent postcolonial openings of the pavilion, for example, with the presence of many non-white British artists, from Chris Ofili to Steve McQueen and Sonia Boyce.

But let's return to 1948, a truly revelatory moment for understanding the intersections of politics and pavilions. In the aftermath of World War II, Greece had no representation, and its space was used by Peggy Guggenheim as a second American Pavilion in order to showcase the new art of the victorious country par excellence. In stark contrast, as clarified in Francesca Castellani's text, Germany, the archetypal defeated country, ceded its pavilion to an exhibition of Impressionists, a movement that, in the early 20th-century climate, was progressively proposed as representatively French more than as an international koiné. This was despite the fact that there were a trio of German artists to exhibit, who found shelter in the Italian Pavilion. Although the reasons for this choice remain to be fully understood, it is clear that giving strong and proud visibility to such a wounded country undergoing moral reconstruction may have been deemed inappropriate. Instead, it was considered preferable to present German art in a so-called “protected area”.

The Central Pavilion (formerly known as “Palazzo dell'Esposizione”, and renamed the Italian Pavilion during the Fascist era) played a pivotal role again in 1950 as the place to make evident both the gaps intended to be filled regarding

an avant-garde art never previously exhibited in Venice as it deserved, and the spirit of the circulation of ideas that the new republican Italy wanted to consider foundational. Letizia Giardini's essay highlights how Italy wanted, metaphorically and tangibly with Carlo Scarpa's design interventions, to host exhibitions dedicated to the Fauves—while at the same time, the French Pavilion deepened the theme with a solo exhibition of Matisse, to Four Masters of Cubism and the signatories of the first Futurist manifesto, seeking to connect this singular Italian avant-garde to the repercussions it could have had in France. The idea was to untie Futurism from the label of a movement aligned with fascism, a shift that occurred long after its first appearance.

While the 1948 Biennale was characterised by a dialectic of winners and losers, albeit with traits of cultural elegance and without scandalous competitions, the 1950 edition characterises itself, even in the Pavilions, as a moment of awakening and pride. Even countries that did not take part in the war stepped forward in a kind of artistic and cultural contest showcasing their jewels. A prime example was Mexico, as evidenced in the texts by Amelia Chavez-Santiago and Anita Orzes. Despite the controversies that would later problematise its survival, the Mexican Pavilion proudly presented its muralist realism: strongly supported by the Mexican government, Orozco, Rivera, Siqueiros, and Tamayo seemed to embody a third way between Soviet inspired socialist realism and dynamic abstraction, between action painting and informal, binaries that distinguished the Western cultural block during those years.

In that fateful 1950, the desire to present themselves to the world was such that even countries with a lukewarm attitude toward the Biennale decided to participate: this was the case for Portugal, which, along with Ireland and Luxembourg, form a trio of European countries that never wanted to build a pavilion in the Giardini. As explained in the text by Ughetta Molin Fop, the Portuguese presence has indeed continued to be sporadic and scattered in various venues until 1995, when Portugal ceased to pledge its primary allegiance to the São Paulo Biennale, for obvious reasons related to colonial history, and began to turn its attention to the European stage. It is significant that 1950 marked the first Portuguese presence and that true fidelity to the lagoon event began when the critical distancing from the concept of the national pavilion became sharper. A similar trajectory of irregular presence and shifting cultural strategy can also be observed in Esra Yıldız's account of the Pavilion of Turkey from 1956 to 2022, which highlights the country's complex relationship with the Venice Biennale and reveals the interplay between national identity, institutional support, and global visibility.

This apparent contradiction, moreover, embodies a general trend of the Biennale: observing the numbers of participations, it becomes evident that the more the idea of the nation in general and the national pavilion in particular has come into crisis, the more the latter have started to increase, reaching nearly a hundred. It is clear that they respond to a need, and it will be the task of future studies to explore the reasons for this expansion.

One of the most salient motivations can be glimpsed in the need to articulate the traumas and rites of passage of a specific community, as in the aforementioned case of Germany. Althea Ruoppo's text helps to deepen the issue by examining Reinhard Mucha's participation in the German Pavilion of 1990, emphasising his intention to showcase the search for a new post-war spirit through heavy industry and the narratives surrounding it. German identity and its modes of representation are also at the centre of Matteo Bertelé's reflections, who describes the many layers of meaning in Hans Haacke's environmental work "Germany". The torn floor on which spectators walked, surrounded by Nazi signs like a portrait of Hitler at the entrance, clearly led viewers to reflect on a painful past and an unrecconciled wound. At the same time, it introduced the present of a recently reunified Germany, with its themes of integration and adherence to capitalist values; those being promoted by the Biennale as a whole, understood as a treasure chest for the moral, artistic, and economic goods of a globalised world, one governed by private lobbies made apparent in Venice through the management of mass tourism, which in practice often distorts the city it ostensibly honours. The destruction wrought

by misguided ideologies is not over, and the pavilion structure lends itself to reflect both on a country's history and on the place hosting the exhibition; the art itself presented at the Biennale, as part of the touristic and capitalist device, including its presentation in an orthodox display, reveals itself as one of the many commodities within the neoliberal universe that emerged victorious from the Cold War. The pavilions themselves thus become vehicles transporting a transnational and totalising discourse, including a conception of art that simultaneously utilises yet also betrays its local roots.

An additional element that emerges from the arrival of countries less integrated into the Europe-America artistic debate concerns the prospective vision—not only looking to the past—that a culture has of itself. The lack of coincidence between the Jewish people and the Israeli people lends itself decisively to these forward-looking perspectives. In Rachel Kubrik's text, two Jewish-themed participations from 2011 are examined: that in the Israel Pavilion by Sigalit Landau and that of Yael Bartana in the Polish Pavilion. The latter, using a triptych of video footage, reverses the Zionist premise and imagines a return to the homeland—Poland—of all the Jews who were deported from there, while Landau employs water, salt, earth, and other natural elements to envision a reconnection between Jordan and Israel in a vision of the further expansion of the Promised Land. Besides shedding light on a still wide-open knot in the history of post-Shoah redemption, this dual vision suggests how two-fold relationships often arise among the pavilions that further problematise the notion of Nation or at least of ethnically recognisable entities.

Such dialogues between pavilions have taken place using performances and temporary actions involving countries such as Austria, South Korea, and the United Arab Emirates. These events, orchestrated by a self-organised coalition of pavilion curators, starting in 2021, during the Covid-19 pandemic, even proposed an Evolving Manifesto addressing the possibility of interaction between countries in times of crisis. The text by Helge Mooshammer, Peter Mörtenböck, and Carmen Lael Hines traces this unique adventure and demonstrates how, in their more than century-long evolution, the pavilions have come to perceive the construction of a network that links them and makes their connections necessarily fluid.

The criticality of these constructed networks is visually deconstructed in the work *Hour of the Wolf* of Diego Tonus, whose artistic intervention both highlights the relational fabric of artists, curators, and ideas circulating through the pavilions, and underscores the fictionality inherent in the art world -- drawing, like Elmgreen & Dragset's pavilion project, on the cinematic universe of Ingmar Bergman. This contribution also marks the first of what we hope will be many artist projects featured in *OBOE Journal*, opening a new space for visual and conceptual experimentation within its pages.

As a place of expression for a community and of a relationship with the other par excellence, the small world of the Pavilions in the Giardini and outside of them, at the Arsenale or within the urban space, attests to a stance which stridently contrasts with any entrenchment of sovereign states in their established positions. The recent withdrawal from the event by Russia and Israel, while involved in two bloody conflicts, demonstrates an interesting parallel between geopolitical events and the Venice Biennale; the extensive articulation of the Ukrainian Pavilion at the 2022 Biennale, just days after the Russian invasion, confirms how the Venetian platform can also be understood as a place for non-aggressive claims and a realm for exercising soft power. Cultural diplomacy complements the theme of "how to care", in an increasingly expansive awareness of the world at large as well as the world of art. Are we still convinced that abolishing the pavilions or diminishing their declarative strength, relegating them to the centralised direction by the artistic director, would be a good idea?