Art and Politics at the Venice Biennale: The Portuguese case

Ughetta Molin Fop

Abstract

The organisation of national pavilions is the Venice Biennale's most controversial aspect. However, this feature makes the Biennale's narrative especially intriguing, as it represents a crucial point where art and politics are inherently connected. This paper examines the case of Portugal and provides evidence to show that cultural and international policies played a crucial role in shaping the country's participation, with political decisions influencing the development of the country's art scene. While it remains uncertain how the numerous absences and the non-construction of a Portuguese pavilion at the Biennale may have impacted the global recognition of its art over time, it is undeniable that Portugal and its artists missed out on the opportunities presented by one of the world's most prestigious contemporary art biennials until the 1970s.

Keywords

Histories of the Pavilions, Portuguese Pavilion, Venice Biennale, Exhibition Histories, National pavilions

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Art and Politics at the Venice Biennale: The Portuguese Case

Ughetta Molin Fop

The Venice Biennale is unique compared to other biennials due to the inclusion of National Pavilions. The exhibition began in 1895 and featured foreign artists organised by their country of origin in the central pavilion at the Giardini, along with numerous Italian artists initially grouped by region. During its first iterations, the Biennale was a predominantly Italian event, where the presence of international artists was still minimal. In an attempt to increase international participation, the Biennale thus encouraged countries to build their own national pavilions, a solution that also relieved the Venetian organisation of the costs involved in the participation of guest nations.[1] From 1907 to 1995, twenty-nine countries established pavilions inside the Giardini area;[2] to other nations, the Biennale offered or rented exhibition spaces inside the central pavilion or in the Giardini area. A significant increase in participating countries occurred throughout this period, and a corresponding need for more space for the general thematic exhibitions resulted in states without a pavilion having to independently seek a venue within Venice's city centre. With the recovery of new areas within the Arsenale, this problem was partially mitigated as many countries could rent a space there. This organisational system has been and continues to be one of the main criticisms directed at the Biennale.

The first controversy regarding the national pavilions originates in the Biennale's choice to adopt the great universal exhibition model and its resulting implications. In these events, countries participated to show what they considered best represented them, creating exhibition buildings where size, architecture and position were intended to reflect each country's power and importance in the world. To a certain extent, Venice still reflects this tendency, both from an architectural point of view, according to Alloway "their styles are a vivid array of national self-

1 Okwui Enwezor, "Exploding Gardens", in *All the World's Futures: La Biennale di Venezia, 56th International Art Exhibition* (Venice: Marsilio, 2015), 90–110; Marco Mulazzani, *Guide to the Pavilions of the Venice Biennale Since 1887* (Milan: Electa, 2014); Antoni Muntadas and Bartolomeu Marí, *On Translation: I Giardini* (Barcelona: Actar, 2005); Clarissa Ricci, "From Obsolete to Contemporary: National Pavilions and the Venice Biennale", *Journal of Curatorial Studies* 9, no. 1 (2020): 8-39.

2 Belgium (1907), Great Britain (1909), Germany (1909), Hungary (1909), France (1912), Holland (1914), Russia (1914), Spain (1922), Czech Republic and Slovakia (1926), United States (1930), Denmark (1932), Poland (1932), Austria (1934), Greece (1934), ex Yugoslavia - now Serbia (1938), Israel (1952), Egypt (1952), Switzerland (1952), Venezuela (1954), Japan (1956), Finland (1956), Canada (1958), Uruguay (1960), Nordic countries: Sweden, Norway and Finland (1962), Brazil (1964). Australia (1988), South Korea (1995).

images",[3] and from the Giardini map. It is no coincidence that at the Giardini's entrance, immediately to the right, on top of a hillock, there are the France, Great Britain, and Germany pavilions, looking at each other. Slightly lower on the left there is the United States and on the right Russia. In a row along the path between the entrance and the central pavilion are Spain, The Netherlands and Belgium. Before the 1950s, it was mainly European countries that could build their pavilions within the Giardini.

From the 1960s onwards, national representations started to be questioned for different reasons. The pavilion structure was considered outdated and an old-fashioned model which did not correspond to the dominant artistic culture of the time.[4] Following the 1968 protests, the Biennale organised a round table where the Italian critics and art historians Gillo Dorfles and Germano Celant proposed to demolish the pavilions, arguing that these conditioned the exhibition and did not allow debate and promote global views of the contemporary art world.[5] This proposal, however, was not - and is still not - feasible as the pavilions are the property of the nations who built and maintained them, functioning as embassies where the principle of extraterritoriality prevails. From 1972 onwards, a general theme was introduced as a search for a solution to the lack of an exhibition discourse. In the first biennales where this was implemented, the chosen theme was, however, so generic that it did not offer a real research topic. Only with the 1976 iteration was there real progress on this issue, and for the first time, the general theme enabled a real opportunity for a critical discourse between the pavilions.[6] Yet, this was not resumed in all subsequent biennales, as the theme remained only a suggestion and not an obligation for the national pavilions.

From the late 1980s onwards, with the significant changes in the social order resulting from globalisation and post-colonialism, the criticism of the Venice pavilions adopted a different tone: in a transnational world, it no longer made sense to have an artistic exhibition organised according to a criterion of nationality. None of the new biennials that emerged in this period followed the Venetian model, and the overwhelming majority were created as an alternative to the "First World" biennials to showcase the artistic production of other geographies and peripheral countries generally marginalised by these mainstream exhibitions. Even the São Paulo biennial, the only one besides Venice to be organised into national pavilions, abolished them in 2006.

Despite all the limitations the Biennale format mentioned above, in the most recent iterations, we have more and more frequently been witnessing an interesting phenomenon: the pavilions, through curatorial and artistic choices, have become a privileged scenario to offer an updated concept of "nation". The pavilion itself has become a subject of inquiry, a space to contest. Many pavilions have begun to invite curators and /or artists from other countries, thus encouraging debate between artists from different geographical areas. In other cases, pavilions have become the appropriate place to discover and/or incite a discussion on the different realities of their own country or even other nations. Other countries chose to make the pavilions reflect their problematic geopolitical situation.[7] According to Angela Vettese, in this way, the national pavilions compel us to maintain a continuous focus

3
Lawrence Alloway, *The Venice Biennale 1895-1968: from Salon to Goldfish Bowl* (New York Graphic Society, 1968), 17.

4
José Augusto França, "A 32ª Bienal de Veneza", *Colóquio*, n. 30 (October 1964): 16.

5
Vittoria Martini, "The Evolution of an Exhibition Model. Venice Biennale as an Entity in Time", in Federica Martini, Vittoria Martini (eds.), *Just another exhibition. Storie e politiche delle biennali. Histories and Politics of Biennials* (Milan: Postmedia, 2011), 124.

6
Vittoria Martini, *The Evolution of an Exhibition Model*, 129.

7
For some exemples see Ughetta Molin Fop, "Os pavilhões na Bienal de Veneza: Histórias 'nacionais' em evolução", *Working Paper IHA, FCSH, NOVA*, No. 1 (December 2016): 29-40.

on geopolitical history and reflect on issues such as the concept of nations, interstate relations and ethnicity.[8]

The participation of a country in the Biennale is thus a story where cultural policies, geopolitical balances, international relations, and market influences are intertwined. These stories very often facilitate multiple readings, both within a country's cultural and artistic history but also when comparing art history across different states. In particular, and given the Biennale national pavilion format, the study of art in this context can hardly be disentangled from politics. In certain periods, particularly those before and after the world wars, the participation of some countries in the Biennale depended on political alliances or hostilities with Italy. After the end of the Cold War, international relations had become less influential but were not absent. As the art critic and professor Boris Groys states, "through most of the twentieth century (to the end of Cold War), the national pavilions at the Biennale mainly reflected the political and ideological attitudes which prevailed in their countries".[9] But even in the twenty-first century, we still find examples of an intimate relation between art and politics taking place at Venice: in the 2022 iteration, due to the Russian Federation's invasion of Ukraine, the artists and the curator of the Russian pavilion decided not to participate.

For the reasons mentioned above, and considering the Biennale's longevity, studying a country's participation at this event provides a unique setting to explore issues related not only to art and artists, but also to the cultural and international politics of that country. It is therefore not surprising that several national studies already exist. As of the centenary of the Biennale in 1995, the first publications were very descriptive, mainly chronological narratives, containing lists of works and artists. Most countries with a pavilion inside the Giardini have published a book about their presence in Venice. By promoting such studies, they explicitly acknowledged the significance of the Biennale to their cultural histories and their role in affirming national positions in the art world. In the French publication, Didier Schulmann affirms how the exhibition and the catalogue provide "a retrospective look at the image that French art has sought to leave of itself along forty years"[10]; Kunio Yaguchi states that with the Japanese publication "one becomes aware that the history of the Biennale contains an important key to the history of Japanese art",[11] and for Great Britain, according to Clive Phillpot, the list of the artists participating in the Biennale "helps to underscore the pavilion's special place in the history of British art".[12] In recent years, some publications stood out for their extensive research work and their analysis, such as those dedicated to the participation of Russia, Switzerland, Austria and countries of the Asia-Pacific area.[13] These analyses encompass a broad spectrum of approaches, with some concentrating on individual editions and others spanning broader historical periods.

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Angela Vettese, "Preface", in Clarissa Ricci (ed.) *Starting from Venice: Studies on the Biennale* (Milano: et al., 2010), 8-9.

9
Boris Groys, "The Venice Biennale: Gardens, Factories and Institutions", in Nikolai Molok (ed.), *Russian artists at the Venice Biennale: 1895-2013* (Moscow: Stella Art Foundation, 2013), 29.

10
Didier Schulmann, in Association francaise d'action aristique (ed.), *La France a Venise: Le pavillon francais de 1948 a 1988* (Paris, Roma: Carte Segrete, 1990), 12.

11
Kunio Yaguchi, "The Venice Biennale and Japan", in *The Venice Biennale: 40 Years of Japanese participation* (Tokyo: The Japan foundation, The Mainichi newspaper, 1995), 11.

12
Clive Phillpot, "Introduction", in Sophie Bowness and Clive Phillpot Clive (eds.), *Britain at the Venice Biennale 1895-1995* (London: The British Council, 1995), 15.

13
Nikolai Molok (ed.), *Russian artists at the Venice Biennale: 1895 – 2013* (Moscow: Stella Art Foundation, 2013); Regula Krahenbuhl and Beat Wyss, *Biennale Venedig; Die Beteiligung der Schweiz 1920-2013* (Zurigo: SIK-ISEA: Scheidegger & Spiess, 2013); Jasper Sharp, *Austria and the Venice Biennale 1895-2013* (Nurnberg: Verl. für moderne Kunst, 2013); Stephen Nailor, *The Venice Biennale and the Asia-Pacific in the Global Art World* (New York: Routledge, 2020). In addition, there are numerous masters and doctoral theses dedicated to the history of different pavilions.

Additionally, the perspectives explored in these works vary considerably, with some emphasising artworks and artistic movements while others explore curatorship or the chronological evolution of events. This distinction is also evident in the publication of research papers. Some examples include the politics and cultural strategies of the Taiwan Pavilion, the national narratives and cultural diplomacy of the Spanish pavilion during the Franco dictatorship's period of openness in the 1950s, or the curatorial practices of the British pavilion[14]. Despite the importance of these studies, the history of Portugal's participation in the Venice Biennale has not yet been well researched;[15] this paper contributes to filling that gap.

From the outset, Portugal emerged as an emblematic case, primarily for having participated for the first time in 1950 and after that only attending consistently from 1995 onwards. During that period, Portugal participated seven more times, in 1960 and between 1976 and 1986. Moreover, Portugal is the only European country,[16] along with Luxembourg and Ireland, that does not have a pavilion at the Giardini.

Generally, in the history of a country's participation in the Biennale, analysis is based on its attendance. However, in the case of Portugal, the absences are so numerous that neglecting their causes means telling only part of the story. Studying a country's absence, though, often results in a significant lack of documentation; as a result, part of the work developed here is speculative, frequently advancing through the exclusion of causes.

This paper is divided into three parts. The first part demonstrates how the causes of the absences and presences from the 1930s to 1995 were mainly down to choices in foreign policy. The second covers the absences from 1988 to 1993 and the unbuilt pavilion at the Giardini as the results of cultural policy. Finally, the conclusion questions the consequences for Portugal regarding these political decisions and the importance of this kind of study.

The Portuguese absences at the Biennale before the 1930s can be justified by the significant lack of political stability in the country. After more than seven hundred years of monarchy, the First Portuguese Republic was established in 1910, lasting until 1926 and with as many as forty-five governments over this period.[17] The situation stabilised during the Second Republic. After the first four years as Minister of Finance, António de Oliveira Salazar was appointed Prime Minister in 1932, ruling Portugal under an authoritarian regime until 1974, defined as *Estado Novo* or *Salazarism*.[18]

In addition to the political instability, the period between 1895, the date of the Biennale's foundation, and 1930, is characterised by a total absence of documentation attesting to some kind of connection between Portugal and the Venice Biennale. Although documentation on the 1930s and 1940s is also scarce,

14
Chu-Chiun Wei, "From National Art to Critical Globalism", *Third Text 27*, no. 4 (2013), 470-484; Agar Ledo Arias, "National Narratives and Cultural Diplomacy. The Spanish Pavilion at the Venice Biennale during the Franco Dictatorship's *Apertura* in the Fifties", *Quintana: revista do Departamento de Historia da Arte*, n. 21(2022): 1-13; Stefania Portinari, "Curatoiral Practices and 'Intrinsically English' Art: The British Pavilion at the Venice Biennale", *Museum History Journal 16*, no. 1 (2023): 99-117.

15
The participation of Portuguese architects in the Architecture Biennale has been recently explored in the exhibition and its corresponding catalogue: Alexandra Areia and Joaquim Moreno (ed.), *Radar Veneza, Arquitectos portugueses na Bienal 1975-2021* (Matosinhos and Lisbon: Casa da Arquitectura and Direção-Geral das Artes, 2021).

16
The countries that were part of the European Economic Community (EEC) until 1995, the year in which the last pavilion was constructed in Giardini, have been taken into consideration.

17
More information about this decade is available at José Miguel Sardica, "The memory of the portuguese First Republic throughout the twentieth century", *E-Journal of Portuguese History* 9, no. 1, (Summer 2011), https://digitalis-dsp.uc.pt/bitstream/10316.2/25296/1/EJPH9_1_artigo4.pdf.

18
Salazar was prime minister until 1968, when, due to health problems, he was replaced by Marcelo Caetano. On April 25, 1974, with the *Revolução dos cravos* (Carnation Revolution), democracy was re-established in Portugal.

this research uncovers the probable causes of the absences during this period and presents these below, following a process of exclusion.

The first cause to be excluded is ideology. Both Italy and Portugal were led by right-wing authoritarian governments, and from the 1930s the Venice Biennale had become a fascist event. The second cause in question is a possible shortage of cultural contact between the two regimes. Academic and cultural relations between the two countries already existed,[19] and remained frequent.[20] Many of these interactions occurred through institutional channels, including the Italian *Dante Alighieri* society, the Institute of Italian Culture in Lisbon and the Institute of Italian Studies of the Faculty of Letters in Coimbra.[21] The third cause to be excluded is the lack of contact between the Venice Biennale and Portugal. The first document found in the Historical Archive of Contemporary Arts (ASAC) referring to Portugal dates back to 1930. It is a letter from the Biennale addressed to the Portuguese consul in Venice informing him of the potential for building new national pavilions in the Sant'Elena area. Other correspondence has been documented between the Biennale and Portugal from this moment on. In 1934 Portuguese journalists attended the second Venice Film Festival, the Portuguese artist Lino António was invited to exhibit three works in the Spanish pavilion in 1938, and Portugal officially participated in the Venice Film Festival in 1942. The fourth cause to be ruled out is the lack of interest in the Biennale by António Ferro, the director of the Portuguese Secretariado da Propaganda Nacional – SPN (National Propaganda Secretariat). Ferro, the man behind the SPN, was a journalist who, as a friend of many Portuguese modernist artists, had a particular interest in fine art. He was also a great admirer of European fascist movements, Italy's in particular.[22] The choice not to participate (or indeed the lack of decision) depended solely on the only person who had the power to decide at that time, Prime Minister António de Oliveira Salazar.

Although there are no specific documents to prove this hypothesis, three aspects of Salazar's policy may lead to this conclusion. First, fine art was primarily viewed as a propaganda tool; second, funding for cultural initiatives was limited. Finally, Salazar's foreign policy and relationships with countries like Italy played a crucial role in shaping his cultural approach.

According to Salazar, the arts had a mainly propagandistic function.[23] In fact, during the 1930s Portugal invested heavily in participating in a series of international exhibitions.[24] But these events had a touristic and economic promotional purpose as well as providing international legitimisation, particularly in relation to the colonial territories. The role of artists in these exhibitions was functional to the image that the regime wanted to convey.[25] Painting, probably

19
Laura Melania Rocchi, "Presenza culturale italiana in Portogallo nei primi decenni del XX secolo", *Estudos Italianos em Portugal*, n.s. 2 (2007): 357-377.

20
Elisa Pegorin studied connections between Italian and Portuguese architecture in the period 1928-1948, examining the relations and cultural influences between the two countries, and clearly demonstrating the mutual contacts and links in that period. Elisa Pegorin, "Arquitectura e regime em Itália e Portugal. Obras públicas no Fascismo e no Estado Novo (1928-1948)" (Phd diss., Universidade do Porto, 2018).

21
Daniele Serpiglia, "Una questione d'impero: La stampa dell'Estado Novo di fronte alla guerra d'Etiopia", *Storicamente.org. Laboratorio di Storia,* no. 12*,* (2016): 5.

22
Annarita Gori, "António Ferro: fascinazioni italiane e soluzioni portoghesi", in Guya Accornero, Annarita Gori and Daniele Serapiglia (eds.), *Percorsi scienze sociali tra Italia e Portogallo*, Quaderni di Storicamente, no. 9 (2017): 73-88.

23
Artur Portela, *Salazarismo e artes plásticas*, (Lisboa: Instituto de Cultura e Língua Portuguesa, Ministério da Educação e das Universidades, 1982) and Graça dos Santos, "Política do espírito: O bom gosto obrigatório para embelezar a realidade", *Media & Jornalismo*, no.12 (2008): 64.

24
Portugal took part in the international exhibitions in Brussels (1935), Paris (1937), New York (1939) and San Francisco (1939), the colonial exhibitions in Naples (1934) and Tripoli (1935) and the Arte Popular exhibitions in Geneva (1935) and Madrid (1943).

25
Goffredo Adinolfi, *Ai confini del fascismo. Propaganda e consenso nel Portogallo salazarista (1932-1944)* (Milano: FrancoAngeli, 2007), 134-141.

because it was not as magnificent and evocative as sculpture, played a subordinate role.[26] Salazar, for example, defined the dozens of painters who collaborated on the 1940 *Exposição do Mundo Portugues* (Portuguese World Expo) in Lisbon as "decorators".[27] Moreover, in the early 1950s, the Prime Minister revealed in a conversation with French journalist Christine Garnier that he admitted feeling satisfied with the progress made by sculptors and decorators, but he also conceded that there were no great painters or architects who have inspired a following.[28] It is also evident that due to this poor consideration of the arts, the funds available to the SPN were limited, demonstrated by how António Ferro referenced the budget limitations and control to which the SPN was subjected on different occasions.[29] Therefore, considering Salazar's interests and the limited funds for culture, propagandising events would certainly have taken precedence over participating in an art event such as the Biennale.

That said, foreign policy interests also appear to have determined Salazar's choices regarding Portugal's participation in exhibitions abroad. This is exemplified by the influence of Portuguese-Italian political relations with regard to participating in the Biennale.

From the outset, *Estado Novo* was indebted to Italian Fascism in the establishment of certain institutions and in many aspects of its organisation, yet there were also an array of situations in which they differed. For example, Gori and Almeida argue that Mussolini's imperialist visions did not fit into the policies of Salazarism.[30] Nor was the Italian dictator's idea of universal Fascism ever of interest to Salazar, who instead always defended and pursued the national identity of his regime.[31]

Furthermore, relations between the two countries did not improve with the onset of World War II, and perhaps above all, Salazar had no foreign policy interests in Italy. In 1935, he defined the fundamental principles of foreign policy: oriented away from the European continent (except for relations with Spain), and directed towards the Atlantic and the Empire, with the safeguarding of the Luso-British Alliance as an essential requirement.[32] Therefore, the Portuguese absences during the 1930s and 1940s seem mainly to have been caused by inaction, determined by the lack of interest that an artistic event organised in Italy presented for Salazar.

Finally, Portugal participated for the first time in 1950, when the Biennale was already in its twenty-fifth incarnation. So, why did Portugal

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Many quotations from Artur Portela, *Salazarismo e artes plásticas* document this distinction between painting and sculpture during Salazarism. For example: "The regime (...) will diminish Portuguese painting. But it did not cease to mobilise it (...) the regime did its public works, and they had to be decorated" (p. 94); "Salazar, therefore, the regime, put the sculpture in the foreground" (p. 88). In addition, Portela quotes a 1949 speech by António Ferro: "our modern painting may raise doubts, mistrust, irony because perhaps it has not yet found its way (...). But no one can doubt the magnificence of Portuguese sculpture, which is living in its golden age" (p.88). All original quotes in Italian and Portuguese have been translated by the author.

27
Artur Portela, *Salazarismo e artes plásticas*, 95.

28
Artur Portela, *Salazarismo e artes plásticas*, 87.

29
Ferro makes several references to the budget limitations and control to which the SPN expenditure was subjected in António Ferro, "A resposta do director do S.P.N." and "Os primeiros dez anos de actividade", in SNI (ed.), *Catorze Anos de Política do Espírito. Apontamentos para uma exposição apresentados no S.N.I. (Palácio Foz) em Janeiro de 1948* (Lisboa: Secretariado Nacional de Informação, 1948), 21, 26, 30.

30
Annarita Gori and Rita Almeida de Carvalho, "Italian Fascism and the Portuguese Estado Novo: International Claims and National Resistance", *Intellectual History Review* 30, no. 2 (2020): 295-319.

31
Mario Ivani, *Esportare il fascismo. Collaborazione di polizia e diplomazia culturale tra Italia fascista e Portogallo di Salazar (1928-1945)* (Bologna: Cooperativa Libraria Universitaria, 2008).

32
Fernando Rosas and José Maria Brandão de Brito, *Dicionário de história do Estado Novo* (Venda Nova: Bertrand Editora, 1996), 869.

participate on this occasion? The post-war Biennali, led by the art historian Rodolfo Pallucchini, were intended not only to document and display artists and movements silenced during the fascist period, but also to expand international relations, meaning that the participating countries more than doubled during Pallucchini's time in office. And it was in this context that Portugal was invited. This was indeed the first time that the Biennale had issued an invitation to Portugal, albeit that Portugal could have proposed its participation in Venice at any time prior to this. So why did Portugal accept the invitation, and why in 1950 specifically? A more careful study of Portuguese foreign policy and Portugal's relations with Italy implies that these may indeed be the reasons for this choice.

The World War II had ended and, although Portugal had remained neutral, the country had felt the impact of the war, both economically and socially. In addition, the victory of the democracies over the Nazi-fascist regimes had increased the internal voice of the opposition, which saw hope for radical change in Portugal. After the defeat of both Italy and Germany and thus the failure of Fascism and Nazism, Portugal, which was still under an authoritarian regime, needed now more than ever to maintain good international relations. Therefore, in the post-war period Salazar directed his attention towards Europe and the Atlantic.[33] Portugal thus joined the Marshall Plan in 1948, and consequently the European Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OEEC), later becoming a member of NATO in 1949. Relations with Italy, which needed to mend ties with many countries after losing the war, improved in the final three years of the 1940s. Even if the Luso-Italian bilateral relations were centred more on the economic and cultural field than on the political front, these three years played a pivotal role in understanding the Euro-Atlantic positioning strategy adopted by both Portugal and Italy. This strategy subsequently left a lasting imprint on diplomatic relations between the two nations in the following decades. [34] As a result, the late 1940s represented a moment of consolidation for the *Estado Novo*, thanks to relations with western democracies, a more stable financial position, and greater repression of internal opposition. So, in this context, with interest in maintaining established diplomatic relations and exporting the image of an open country, despite ongoing Salazarism, the invitation to participate in Venice was accepted.

Salazar's role in accepting the invitation is also clear from the available documentation. In a handwritten document dated March 6, 1950, Portugal's participation "would still be dependent on the agreement of his Excellency the President of the Council and his authorisation for the substantial expenses required for our participation".[35] Again in early May, Eça de Queiroz, interim director of the Secretariado Nacional da Informação, Cultura Popular e Turismo - SNI (National Secretariat for Information, Popular Culture and Tourism) wrote that "with the approval of the Prime Minister, some Portuguese artists, painters and sculptors, will exhibit their works at the Venice Biennale".[36]

Besides the authorisation of costs, there was further cause for concern: the location of the room within the exhibition. On several occasions (December 1949 and March and April 1950), Portugal asked for information regarding the room's location. At the end of March, even with the assurance from the Biennale that a "dignified and prominent room in the Italian pavilion [...]" would be found and that they would "ensure that unpleasant neighbourly relations are avoided in every respect, including, naturally, the political aspect",[37] Portugal replied with reservation. The insistence, urgency, and need to receive information provided decisive criteria in order to guarantee the Portuguese presence. One could therefore

33
Vera Margarida Coimbra de Matos, *Portugal e Itália: relações diplomáticas (1943-1974)* (Coimbra: Imprensa da Universidade de Coimbra, 2010), 46.

34
Vera Margarida Coimbra de Matos, *Portugal e Itália,* 46.

35
Document from Eça de Queiroz to Calheiros de Menezes, May 12, 1950 in SNI Archive, box 4181.

36
Document from Eça de Queiroz to Calheiros de Menezes, May 12, 1950 in SNI Archive, box 4181.

37
Document from Mario Novello (Biennale) to Francesco D'Avillez (SNI), March 14, 1950 in ASAC – Pavilion boxes, Acts 1938-1968, *Paesi* series, no. 23 and and SNI Archive - box no. 4181.

reasonably assume that it was another of Salazar's requests, given that it was purely geopolitical and not out of artistic interest.

After this initial presence in 1950, Portugal participated again in 1960. However, during this ten year-period Portugal was invited just twice by the Biennale, in 1952 and in 1954. In 1952, the invitation was refused due to a "bureaucratic" problem. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs in Lisbon forwarded the invitation to the SNI, the body that was supposed to organise the pavilion, just a few months before the opening of the Biennale. Due to this delay in communication, the secretary of the SNI replied negatively because there were neither the necessary funds nor the time to organise participation.

The Biennale invited Portugal again in September 1953. In this case, the situation was different. The SNI received the invitation in time and answered positively. But at the beginning of March, it was forced to amend its decision because the Minister of the Presidency, J.P. da Costa Leite, issued the following directive regarding the matter: "The proposed representation does not appear to be of interest".[38] As the art historian Lígia Afonso analysed, this rejection was related to the Portuguese participation in the second São Paulo Biennial in 1953.[39] Participation in this event had been organised with less regulation and the selection included some artists and works which "openly opposed" the Salazarist regime. In fact, when Costa Leite found out that such works have been exhibited in Brazil, he reacted strongly forbidding the SNI to collaborate with or admit in its exhibitions, or in those in which it had to cooperate, works by artists from the surrealist school or related movement.[40] Ironically, when Pallucchini communicated the size of the room that would be reserved for Portugal in 1954, he added that "Portuguese artists have the potential to shine, as they demonstrated in the second São Paulo Biennial, where I had the privilege of witnessing a truly exceptional and meticulously organised contribution".[41] This demonstrates that those works so heavily criticised by the Portuguese government had made a positive impression on the General Secretariat of the Biennale.

After Portugal refused to participate in the Biennale for two consecutive iterations, it no longer received invitations from the Biennale. It did, however, return to participate in Venice in 1960, although once more not owing to its own initiative. It was the idea of Guido Burgada, the director of the Italian Institute in Lisbon. With the collaboration of Arnaldo Corrias, the Italian Ambassador in Lisbon, he asked for Portugal to be invited to the Biennale.

From its participation in 1960 to the end of the regime in 1974, Portugal did not participate in the Biennale, neither did ask to participate, nor did the Biennale issue an invitation. The most probable reason for this absence was due to Portuguese foreign policy, and perhaps, the colonial wars.[42] Indeed, in the 1960s, there was a fundamental estrangement between the two countries. In Italy, at the

38
Letter from José Avellos, on behalf of the General Secretariat of the SNI to the Director General, Department of Political Affairs and Internal Administration of the Portuguese Ministry of Foreign Affairs, March 19, 1954, in Archive of the Portuguese Ministry of Foreign Affairs - second floor archive, M.629, A 3.João Pinto da Costa Leite was professor of political economics and politics of the *Estado Novo*. Since August 1950 he had acted as a Minister of Salazar's government until July 1955.

39
Lígia Filipa Dias Afonso, "Dias de saída. O SNI e a Bienal de São Paulo na génese da internacionalização contemporânea da arte portuguesa (1951-1973)" (PhD diss., Universidade Nova de Lisboa, 2018), 117-120.

40
Lígia Filipa Dias Afonso, *Dias de saída*, 118.

41
Letter from Pallucchini to Antonio Venturini, Minister Plenipotentiary of the Italian Republic in Lisbon, on January 13, 1954 in ASAC Pavilion boxes, Acts 1938-1968, *Paesi* series, no. 23.

42
The Portuguese Colonial Wars (1961–1974) were a series of armed conflicts between Portugal and its African colonies: Angola, Mozambique, and Guinea-Bissau. These wars emerged in the context of post-World War II decolonization, as nationalist movements sought independence from colonial rule. The United Nations General Assembly and Security Council condemned Portuguese policies, passing resolutions that identified them as violations of the right to self-determination. The 1974 Carnation Revolution ended the dictatorship in Portugal and initiated the process of decolonization, leading to the independence of its African colonies by 1975.

beginning of the decade, several protests were made against the Salazar regime through published press articles, conferences, and even street demonstrations. Moreover, Italy was in favour of the political self-determination of peoples decreed by the UN and which Portugal, in its colonial territories, was not yet implementing.

Further confirmation of the relation between these absences and Portuguese foreign policy can be found, in comparison with the constant Portuguese presence at the São Paulo Biennial from the 1950s onwards (the only unofficial Portuguese participation was at the seventh São Paulo Biennial in 1963). The Brazilian biennial was created according to the Venice Biennale national pavilion model in 1951, and so the Portuguese presences in the two biennials are comparable.[43]

The participations in São Paulo were not due to a preference for the artistic event, as Venice maintained its international prestige nor was the choice determined by economic reasons, as the costs of organising a pavilion in Italy were low compared to doing so in Brazil. As such, the only reasonable justification would be foreign policy: relations with Brazil were a priority for Salazar from the beginning of his government. On the contrary, Italy never featured highly among *Estado Novo's* foreign priorities. Furthermore, as observed by Lígia Afonso, the constant Portuguese presence in São Paulo cannot be detached from the historiographical narrative that links the two countries through imperial ties, characterised by sentiments and influenced by expectations. Understanding it involves recognizing the Portuguese attachment to a former colony and the dominance of their lingua franca, imposed on Brazil centuries before.[44] In Europe, Portugal's role was different. While in Brazil it remained the coloniser, in Venice it was a peripheral country.

Noteworthily, the lack of interest in investing in the Biennale, compared to that of São Paulo, continued beyond Salazar and SNI/SEIT (the SNI was transformed into the Segreteria de Estado da Informação e Turismo – SEIT, Secretary of State for Information and Tourism, in 1964). In fact, from 1961 onwards, participation in Brazil was possible thanks to the collaboration of the Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation (CGF), which took over its management completely from 1975 to 1996. [45] In stark contrast, the CGF never showed any interest in the Venice Biennale.

Alongside its absences, Portugal's return to the Biennale in 1976 was arguably also primarily determined by foreign policy. During the 1970s, and in particular during the presidency of the socialist Carlo Ripa di Meana from 1974 to 1978, the Biennale carried with it strong political connotations. In the exhibition catalogue, it was openly stated that there was a concern to give the event a clear anti-fascist orientation.[46] Portugal, with the Carnation Revolution on April 25, 1974, had put an end to forty-two years of authoritarian rule, and Carlo Ripa di Meana invited Portugal to celebrate its return to the fold of democratic nations.[47] Indeed, the Biennale offered the prestigious Alvar Aalto pavilion at no cost.[48] Furthermore, Frederick Fogh, the architect in charge of restoring Aalto's pavilion that year, said that the renovation of the pavilion also represented "the opportunity for a political gesture, such as the expulsion of Argentina from the pavilion, which had recently become a dictatorship, and the installation of Portugal, which, on the contrary, had

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Lígia Filipa Dias Afonso, *Dias de saída*, 32-33.

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Lígia Filipa Dias Afonso, *Dias de saída*, 59.

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The Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation was created in Lisbon in 1956 according to the last will and testament of Calouste Sarkis Gulbenkian. CGF had and retains great importance in Portuguese cultural life.

46
"Spagna/ avanguardia artistica e realtà sociale / 1936-76" in *La Biennale di Venezia 1976: ambiente, partecipazione, strutture culturali: catalogo generale* (Venezia: La Biennale di Venezia, 1976), 176.

47
Document from Poppe Cardoso to Filipe Albuquerque, August 19, 1976 in Archive of the Portuguese Embassy in Rome - box E/R430.

48
The Alvar Aalto pavilion is the Pavilion of Finland. Since the Nordic Pavilion was completed in 1962 up until 2005, the Alvar Aalto-pavilion was rented to other countries.

embraced democracy".[49] This enthusiasm for Portugal was also confirmed by the main artist of the Portuguese Pavilion in 1976, Alberto Carneiro,[50] and was similarly reflected in a report from the Embassy's cultural advisor in Rome, Poppe Cardoso. He noted that, "In Venice [...], it was easy to feel the climate of friendliness and goodwill that at this moment involves all that is Portuguese and that it is urgent to maintain and foster".[51] However, despite this favorable atmosphere, Portugal failed to fully capitalise on the opportunity. Between 1976 and 1986, Portuguese participation in Venice was marked by poor planning, limited economic investment, and a near total absence of communication and public relations. Some artists selected for the Portuguese pavilion during this period mentioned that although their experiences were positive, they had little to no impact on their careers or international visibility.[52]

From 1988 to 1993, Portugal did not participate in the Biennale, and once again the cause of this pause seems to have been a cultural policy decision. The only document found on this issue, a *Memorando sobre a Bienal de Veneza* (Memorandum on the Venice Biennale) drafted by the Secretaria de Estado da Cultura - SEC (Secretary of State for Culture) in March 1994, stated that the decision not to invest in the Biennale during those years was due to a perceived decline in the exhibition's quality, and also because "similar events vied with Venice for dominance in art fairs, particularly ARCO in Madrid and the São Paulo Biennial. At the same time, alternative platforms for promoting visual artists - such as Europalia and the European Capitals of Culture - began to emerge, diminishing the significance Venice had held in the past".[53]

However, these justifications seem poorly grounded. ARCO Madrid, as an art fair, certainly did not challenge the Biennale's hegemony. Furthermore, nor did the São Paulo Biennal provide sufficient justification, having coexisted with that in Venice for almost forty years. Likewise, the Europalia[54] and the European Capitals of Culture, given their broad scope, can hardly be considered "competitors" with the Biennale. If any, comparable "new forms of dissemination"[55] could have been the biennials that started to emerge in that period, which brought new energy, ideas, and values to the world of contemporary art biennials.

Portugal's definitive return to Venice in 1995, the centenary of the Biennale, also corresponded to the Portuguese government's first real interest in the construction of a pavilion. Before this date, there are only a few documents, mainly from consular bodies, that address this issue. The first is the letter that the Biennale sent to the Portuguese consul in Venice in 1930 regarding the possibility of building a national pavilion in the new exhibition area of Sant'Elena. Almost certainly, considering that Portugal had not yet participated in the Biennale and was experiencing a period of continued unstable national politics, this proposal was not taken into consideration. However, in 1950, when Portugal participated, the pavilion building issue was taken into account, but only from a financial point of

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Frederik Fogh, "Il restauro del padiglione di Alvar Aalto", in Timo Keinanen (ed.), *Alvar Aalto: il padiglione finlandese alla Biennale di Venezia* (Milano: Electa, 1991), 44.

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Conversation held between the author and the artist in Santo Tirso, Portugal, on July 13, 2015.

51
Letter from Lopes Cardoso to Filipe Alburquerque, August 19, 1976 in Archive of the Portuguese Embassy in Rome - box E/R430.

52
Conversations held between the author and the following artists: José Barrias in Lisbon, Portugal, on May 26, 2015; Pedro Calapez in Lisbon, Portugal, in February 2016; Alberto Carneiro in Santo Tirso, Portugal, on July 13, 2015; José Melo e Castro via Skype on December 15, 2015; Carlos Nogueira in Oeiras, Portugal, in April 2016.

53
Document in Archive of the of the Portuguese Embassy in Rome - box E/R448.

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Europalia is a cultural festival in Belgium that began in 1969, featuring a variety of artistic programmes, including visual arts, performing arts, film, music, literature, and more, which focus on a specific country or theme. In 1991, the theme was Portugal.

55
"Memorandum on the Venice Biennale" prepared by the Portuguese Secretary of State for Culture in March 1994, in Archive of the of the Portuguese Embassy in Rome, box E/R448.

view. In fact, the Portuguese Minister in Rome, in the report of his visit during the Biennale opening, wrote that he had been informed by colleagues that a pavilion at the Giardini would imply high maintenance costs, especially for decay due to the Venetian humidity and the long months of closure.[56]

The pavilion building issue officially returned in May 1984, when the Portuguese ambassador in Rome wrote to the Portuguese Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA) to inform them that the opportunity remained to build pavilions in the Giardini area and, if Portugal was interested, the Embassy could take the necessary steps to make a formal request. From the documents, it would seem that both the Embassy and the MFA were in favour of the pavilion's construction.[57] However, the SEC, the body that should have taken this decision, did not seem to have considered this opportunity.

It is probably no coincidence that it was only in 1995, when the Biennale no longer granted space to countries without pavilions, that Portugal showed an interest in building its own pavilion. However, the desire to build a permanent pavilion and the permanent return of Portugal to Venice, were also foreign policy issues predominately determined by an issue of prestige with respect to other European countries. Having joined the EEC in 1986, Portugal was the only country in the Community besides Luxembourg and Ireland that did not have its own pavilion in the Giardini in 1995. In fact, in the few documents found on this subject there are no references to cultural policy choices, whereas other European countries are mentioned. For example, it was written that the SEC "showed great interest in Portugal's participation, with a similar visibility to most EU member states" and "the development of this action [pavilion building] [...] is arousing great interest in the European Community countries".[58] The Portuguese proposal in 1995, which included a project by architect Alvaro Siza, did not receive a definitive response, because the new city plan for Venice was awaiting approval. Thus, the idea of building a pavilion persisted over the following two years with a clear willingness by the Portuguese Minister of Culture, Manuel Maria Carrilho, who tried to obtain a space to build a pavilion through both institutional and personal contacts. Unfortunately, it was too late. In fact, the Venice municipality has not issued any further building permission since the 1990s. The last pavilion to open was Korea's in 1995.

The reconstruction presented in this paper shows how the study of the Biennale offers a privileged channel to study the interconnections between politics and fine art. In particular, and by focusing on the Portuguese case, it is evident that not only cultural but also international policy played a decisive role in shaping Portuguese participation at one of the most relevant stages in the art world, and how political decisions critically influenced the development of the art scene in that country. It is not possible to know whether or how the numerous absences and the non-construction of a pavilion at the Biennale have affected the international spread of Portuguese art over time. However, Portugal and its artists certainly did not benefit from being practically absent from one of the most prestigious contemporary art biennials of the time until the 1970s. The participation of any country in exhibitions such as the Biennale was important not only to bring its own artists to the international stage, but also to discover other foreign artists

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Document from Francisco de Calheiros e Menezes, Legation of Portugal in Rome to the Portuguese Ministry of Foreign Affairs, June 12, 1950, in Archive of the Portuguese Ministry of Foreign Affairs - second floor archive, M.306, A 59.

57
Letter from the Portuguese ambassador in Rome, Andersen to the Portuguese Ministry of Foreign Affairs, May 10, 1984 in Archive of the Portuguese Ministry of Foreign Affairs box E/R443; document from Ernesto De Sousa to the director of the coordinating office for external cultural activities, Portuguese Ministry of Culture, July 10, 1986, in Ernesto de Sousa's estate, National Library of Portugal, D6, box 38_8

58
Documents from Patricia Salvação Barreto (SEC) to João Diogo Nunes Barata (Portuguese Ambassador in Rome) November 28, 1994 and to Jõao Lima Pimentel (Director of Europe Services, Ministry of Foreign Affairs), August 20, 1994, in Archive of the Portuguese Embassy in Rome - box E/R448/5 and box E/R448.

and to activate exchanges and relations with institutions in other countries, which, at that time, were almost impossible to establish in any other way. This last point is exemplified by the case of the pavilion of Canada that "has not only marked the history of Canadian art, but has also functioned as a meaningful encounter point between Canadian and international art - a window through which Canada shows the world its national artistic and curatorial practice".[59]

Furthermore, by observing the historical participation of other countries, one can see how national participation in Venice has proven particularly important for less influential countries in the contemporary art world. In the case of Iceland, for example, "the Biennale is the only official presentation of Icelandic art abroad".[60] The discourse is similar for (former) Yugoslavia:

The Venice Biennale is the only international art event where we have our premises, independent of the international jury and its invitation, as is the case with many other such exhibitions. [...] Regular appearances at the Biennale give us an opportunity to plan in advance, to formulate a stable policy and to keep the world informed of current art trends in Yugoslavia.[61]

In Korea the inauguration of the national pavilion at the Biennale is "marked as crucial in all the contemporary art texts, it is seen as an official recognition and international affirmation of Korean contemporary art".[62] And finally, "The Taiwan Pavilion at the Venice Biennale not only functions as an exhibition venue on the international stage but also gives impetus to the continual redefinition of Taiwanese contemporary art".[63]

Although having a permanent pavilion is not essential in order to participate in the Biennale, its construction would probably have ensured commitment and continuity for Portugal, representing an additional form of prestige and recognition. In fact, at least until the late 1990s, not having a pavilion at the Giardini was a stigma. In press releases and articles, the works and artists of countries with permanent pavilions were generally reviewed or discussed, while those without pavilions were mentioned or grouped together as an end note. In the words of the Italian art historian and critic Gillo Dorfles, referring to the 1986 Biennale when for the first time Italy did not exhibit in the central pavilion but in the Corderie: "Why did the Italian section abandon its pavilion, to which it has always been 'entitled', and had to humiliate itself at the level of the countries without a pavilion? This is neither proof of modesty nor a fair way of comparing the different nations with our own".[64] Even the curator of the Portuguese pavilion in 1986, José Luís Porfírio, referred to the room assigned to Portugal as "the poor countries' corner".[65] However, at present, with a larger number of countries participating and divided between the Giardini, the Arsenale and Venice city centre, this difference is no longer so marked.

Currently, the real problem of not having a permanent pavilion is the need to find a new space at each biennale. Portugal has been hosted in fourteen different spaces in its twenty-three participations. This instability not only makes it complicated to manage from an organisational point of view, it also prevents any identification, significant enough in the context of the Biennale, between a

59
Valentine Moreno, *Venice Biennale and the Canada Pavilion,* 16

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Laufrey Helgadóttir, "Icelanders at the Venice Biennale", in *Syning syninganna: Island i Feneyjum i 50 ar. 50 years of Icelandic art at the Venice Biennale* (Reykjavik: Reykjavik Art Museum, 2011), 24.

61
Marijan Susovski, "Introduction", in Košcević, Želimir (ed.), *Venecijanski Biennale i jugoslavenska moderna umjetnost, 1895-1988* (Zagreb: Galerije grada Zagreba, 1988), 10.

62
Samantha Chia, "Il Padiglione della Repubblica di Corea slla Biennale di Venezia. Arte come identità" (Master diss., Ca'Foscari University of Venice, 2019), 4.

63
Chu-Chiun Wei, *From National Art to Critical Globalism*, 484.

64
Gillo Dorfles, "XLII Biennale: bilancio o epicrisi?," *Vernissage,* 36 insert of *Il Giornale dell'Arte* (July-August 1986).

65
Conversation held between the author and the curator in Lisbon, Portugal, on January 17, 2016.

space and a country. Despite this challenge, Portugal has maintained its presence in Venice for the past thirty years. However, as the artist João Penalva, who represented Portugal in the 2001 Biennale, said in a recent interview, "the lack of a Pavilion of Portugal at the Giardini will probably always be a reminder of the chronically poor investment in cultural activity from the Portuguese State, from the days of the dictatorship to today".[66]

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66
João Penalva, interview by author via email, June 13, 2020.

Author's Biography

Ughetta Molin Fop developed her research on Portugal's participation in the Venice Biennale through a PhD scholarship at the Institute of Art History, NOVA University of Lisbon – School of Social Sciences and Humanities. She holds a BA in Public Relations from the University of Udine, an MA in the Organization of Cultural Events from the University of Ferrara and an MA in the History of Art from the University of Padua.