

Studies on the Venice Biennale: National Pavilions

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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, clearly inspired by the structures dedicated to nations in international commercial Expos,² 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 creativity of neglected and remote countries in the world of Western art.³

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 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

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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.

2

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

3

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 Biondi); 1912 Holland (Gustav Ferdinand Boberg), demolished and rebuilt in 1953 (Gerrit Thomas Rietveld); 1914 Russia (Aleksej V. Scusev); 1922 Spain (Javier De Luque) the front was redesigned in 1952 by Joaquín Vaquero Palacios; 1926 Czechoslovakia (Otakar Novotný); 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).

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"⁴ 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.⁵ 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.⁶

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,⁷ 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 1993,⁸ the histories written for these occasions largely reflect the need for countries to celebrate their presence in Venice, often on the occasion of anniversaries.

4

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

5

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.

6

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.

7

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, Antefirma edizioni luav, 2020), 122-133.

8

Peter Weibel "The Transnational Pavilion" in Andrea Fraser, Christian Philipp Müller, Gerwald Rockenschaub (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. 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.

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?

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	The Padiglione dell’America Latina: A Fascist Project of Cultural Diplomacy at the Venice Biennale, 1929-1932 Laura Moure Cecchini Abstract Several nations from Latin America are currently represented at the Venice Biennale, either with pavilions in the Giardini, temporary showcases in the Arsenale, or by leasing spaces throughout the city. Yet the Latin American participation during the institution's formative years was marked by considerable difficulties. This paper examines the unsuccessful attempt to create a “Padiglione dell’America Latina”, a cultural diplomacy initiative that originated in 1932 under Antonio Maraini’s Secretariat. This visionary project could have provided Mexico, Argentina, Uruguay, Chile, and Brazil with a stable representation in what was then the leading exhibition of contemporary art. Despite significant support from the Biennale administrations, this initiative did not succeed. The failure to realise the “Padiglione dell’America Latina” — a situation tied to the global geopolitical issues that arose after the 1929 Wall Street Crash, rather than disinterest from the Biennale or Latin American nations — had profound and lasting implications. Yet the notion of “Latin America” is inherently artificial, burdened with colonial and imperialist associations, and it does not have widespread acceptance in the region. The arbitrary inclusion of the aforementioned countries under this label may have jeopardised the project from the very beginning. Keywords Global modernism, Argentine modernism, Latin American art, Venice Biennale, Cultural diplomacy		
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The Padiglione dell'America Latina: A Fascist Project of Cultural Diplomacy at the Venice Biennale, 1929-1932¹

Laura Moure Cecchini

Since its founding in 1895, the Venice Biennale has been a key player in the internationalisation of the art world. It is still one of the most important places where art is staged as cultural diplomacy, where geopolitical conflicts are played out in the supposedly neutral field of aesthetics.² In the first decades of the institution, this was most evident during the early years of Antonio Maraini's administration, before Italy's invasion of Ethiopia in 1935. At that time, the Biennale briefly presented itself as the "Geneva of the Arts".³

Among the various diplomatic initiatives of the Maraini administration, the project to establish a permanent Padiglione dell'America Latina (Latin American Pavilion) at the Giardini deserves special attention, and it is the subject of the following pages. This far-sighted project would have given Mexico, Argentina, Uruguay, Chile, and Brazil, as early as 1932, a permanent foothold in what was then the most prestigious international exhibition of contemporary art. At the same time the artificiality of the concept of "Latin America" – a term laden with colonial and imperialist overtones, coined by a French intellectual in the 1830s and still not widely accepted by much of the Mexican and Brazilian *intelligentsia* – and the arbitrary inclusion of the aforementioned five countries under such a label may have doomed the project from the outset.

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My thanks go to Miriam Basilio, Giovanni Bianchi, Francesca Castellani, Ana Gonçalves Magalhães, Anita Orzes, Vittorio Pajusco, and Stefania Portinari, with whom on various occasions I have shared parts of this research and who have set me onto new paths and prevented mistakes; to Clarissa Ricci and Camilla Salvaneschi for their tireless work to get this issue to light; and to the two anonymous readers for their very helpful suggestions.

2

For the notion of "cultural diplomacy" see (among others) Frederick C. Barghoorn, *The Soviet Cultural Offensive: The Role of Cultural Diplomacy in Soviet Foreign Policy* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1960); Max Kozloff, "American Painting During the Cold War", *Artforum* 11, no. 9 (1973): 43; Eva Cockcroft, "Abstract Expressionism, Weapon of the Cold War", *Artforum* 12, no. 10 (1974): 39; Michael Auwers, "The Gift of Rubens: Rethinking the Concept of Gift-Giving in Early Modern Diplomacy", *European History Quarterly* 43, no. 3 (July 1, 2013): 421-441; Patricia M. Goff, "Cultural Diplomacy", in Andrew Cooper, Jorge Heine, and Ramesh Thakur (eds.), *The Oxford Handbook of Modern Diplomacy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 1-19; David Clarke, "Cultural Diplomacy", *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of International Studies*, November 19, 2020, <https://oxfordre.com/internationalstudies/view/10.1093/acrefore/9780190846626.001.0001/acrefore-9780190846626-e-543>, accessed June 2024.

3

Antonio Maraini to Guido Beer, May 12, 1932, Archivio Centrale dello Stato, Presidenza Consiglio dei Ministri 1934-1936, b.14.1.283.

In the preceding years, two exhibitions in Paris had already brought together artists from the American continent under the label of “Latin America”, attempting to overcome divisions. For example, in 1924 the *Exposition d'Art Latino-Américaine* opened at the Musée Galliera with works by Argentine, Brazilian and Uruguayan artists, while in 1930 Uruguayan painter Joaquín Torres-García presented the *Première Exposition du Groupe Latino-Américain de Paris* at the Galerie Zak, with artists from Uruguay, Argentina, Chile, Mexico, Cuba, Guatemala, Brazil, Ecuador, Mexico, and Colombia. In 1940, at the Riverside Museum, a Latin American *Exhibition of Fine Arts* of Brazil, Ecuador, Mexico, and Venezuela opened in conjunction with the New York World's Fair. Yet it was not until 1943 that the Museum of Modern Art in New York organised its first retrospective of so-called “Latin American art”.⁴ The “Pavilion of Latin America” at the Venice Biennale, then, was quite visionary in imagining a common exhibition space for countries with such different histories.

The first years of Maraini's secretariat (1928-1942) were a challenging time for international relations. In Latin America, the Wall Street Crash of 1929 had both political and economic consequences. The decline in industrial production in Europe and the US shook the economies of Chile, Peru, and Bolivia, which were based on mining exports. Countries such as Uruguay and Argentina, whose main exports were staples such as cereals and meat, recovered relatively quickly from the crisis, while those that exported luxury goods such as coffee, tropical fruits or sugar struggled. In general, however, Latin American economies were heavily dependent on foreign credit and trade, and the crisis hit both hard.

The social consequences of the Great Depression (rural depopulation, rising unemployment, and urban poverty) facilitated the emergence of dictatorial and populist regimes – many directly inspired by Italian fascism – throughout the region.⁵ After 1929, Italy did indeed pursue a systematic geopolitical strategy towards Latin America, seeking new markets, raw materials, and international allies. While economic ties between Italy and Latin America remained weak (and could not compete with those established by the US, Germany, and England), cultural and ideological ties were strengthened in the 1930s – as fascism was seen by many Latin American intellectuals and politicians as an alternative model to face the economic crisis, as a counterpoint to US hegemony in the region, and as a valid response to the threat posed by communism.⁶ This is therefore the context in which the project for the “Padiglione dell'America Latina” should be seen. The Great Depression had profound consequences for Latin American art markets, as it did for other art markets. With local art scenes still small, only countries with government-sponsored art programmes (such as Mexico) were able to provide work for artists. The circulation of works by Latin American artists was curtailed by the collapse of the global mar-

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Lincoln Kirstein, *The Latin-American collection of the Museum of Modern Art* (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1943). See also Álvaro Medina, “La fondation de l'art latino-américain, 1887-1930”, in *Art d'Amérique Latine, 1911-1968* (Paris: Editions du Centre Pompidou, 1992), 26-39; Michele Greet, “Occupying Paris: The First Survey Exhibition of Latin American Art”, *Journal of Curatorial Studies* 3, no. 2-3 (June 2014): 212-236; Michele Greet, *Transatlantic Encounters: Latin American Artists in Paris Between the Wars* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2018); Miriam Basilio, “Evolving Taxonomies at The Museum of Modern Art in the 1930s and '40s and the Definitions of the 'Latin American Collection'”, in Edward J. Sullivan (ed.), *The Americas Revealed: Collecting Colonial and Latin American Art in the United States* (University Park, PA: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 2018), 28-43. In the Italian universal exhibition of 1911 there was a pavilion devoted to “Latin America” (which did not include Argentina or Brazil, which had a separate pavilion, but rather Uruguay, Venezuela, Ecuador, Peru and Chile), but it was devoted mostly to industrial crafts: *Guida ufficiale della Esposizione internazionale: Torino 1911* (Turin: Momo, 1911), 227.

5

Paulo Drinot and Alan Knight, *The Great Depression in Latin America* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2014).

6

For an Italian fascist take on Latin America, see Oreste Villa, *L'America Latina Problema Fascista* (Roma: Nuova Europa, 1933).

ket.⁷ In addition, the economic crisis had made the traditional 'European tour' no longer viable for many artists, depriving them of the opportunity to show their work to international audiences and participate in networks with foreign artists. It would therefore have been in the interest of Latin American artists to be given a permanent space to exhibit their work at the Venice Biennale.

But despite the encouragement of the Biennale's administrators, the project failed: in part, no doubt, because of the international geopolitical and financial situation following the stock market crash of 1929, but perhaps also because of the Mexican, Argentinean, Uruguayan, Chilean, and Brazilian art worlds' confusion over both the idea of "Latin American art" and the political stakes of Italian fascism. The fiasco of the Padiglione dell'America Latina, then, had long-lasting consequences.⁸ Until the opening of the Venezuelan pavilion (1954-56), no Latin American country had a permanent space at the Venice Biennale. Even today, only three Latin American countries (Brazil, Uruguay, and Venezuela) have a pavilion in what remains the Biennale's most prestigious space, the Giardini.

Latin American artists at the Biennale under Fradeletto and Pica's administrations

The Padiglione dell'America Latina was by no means the first time in which Latin American artists were invited to participate in the Venice Biennale. In fact, artists from many (but not all) of the region's countries were included in the Biennale from an early date in its history.⁹ Already under the directorship of Antonio Fradeletto (1895-1914), some Latin American artists based in Europe were included in the Biennale. To my knowledge, the first Latin American artist in the Biennale was José Fiuza Guimarães, who participated in the 1899 iteration. Although the Biennial catalogue states that Fiuza was from Rio de Janeiro, other sources suggest he was born in Portugal but emigrated to Brazil as a teenager and worked there throughout his career – according to certain definitions of citizenship, he could therefore be considered a "Brazilian" artist.¹⁰ Conversely, the first Latin American-born artist at the Biennale was the Argentine (but child of Italian emigrants) Pio Collivadino.¹¹ His diptych *Vita onesta* (Honest Life, 1901) was included in the 1901 Biennale and acquired by the Fondazione Artistica Marangoni in Udine, where it remains in the collection of the Galleria d'Arte Moderna-Casa Cavazzini. Collivadino, who lived in

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I would like to thank an anonymous peer-reviewer for encouraging me to think about this issue. On Latin American art markets, among others, see: José Carlos García Durand, *Arte, privilegio e distinção. Artes plásticas, arquitetura e classe dirigente no Brasil, 1855-1985* (São Paulo: Perspectiva/Edusp, 1989); Patricia M. Artundo, "La Galería Witcomb 1868-1971", *Memorias de una Galería de Arte* (Buenos Aires: Fondo Nacional de las Artes, 2000), 13-57; María Isabel Baldasarre, *Los dueños del arte. Coleccionismo y consumo cultural en Buenos Aires* (Buenos Aires: Edhasa, 2006); Talía Bermejo, "La Asociación Amigos del Arte en Buenos Aires (1924-1942): estrategias de exhibición artística y promoción del coleccionismo", in María José Herrera (ed.), *Exposiciones de arte argentino y latinoamericano. Curaduría, diseño y políticas culturales* (Córdoba/Buenos Aires: Escuela Superior de Bellas Artes Dr. José Figueroa Alcorta, 2011), 41-50; María Isabel Baldasarre and Viviana Usubiaga, "El mercado del arte en América Latina. Valorización, circulación y consumo de obras durante los siglos XX y XXI", *H-ART. Revista de Historia, teoría y crítica de arte* 1, no. 4 (2019): 65-77.

8

For more about unrealised pavilions of countries from Latin America see Anita Orzes, "Latin America at the Venice Biennale: Histories of Unrealised National Pavilions", in this issue.

9

I have traced this history in Laura Moure Cecchini, "Tra entusiasmi, dubbi e fallimenti: arte latinoamericana alla Biennale di Venezia, 1899-1942", *Studi di Memofonte*, no. 31 (2024), 158-194.

10

Terza Esposizione Internazionale d'Arte della città di Venezia 1899: catalogo illustrato (Venezia: Premiato Stabilimento di Carlo Ferrari, 1899) 107. On discussions about Brazilian identity in relation to art, see Rafael Cardoso, "The Brazilianness of Brazilian Art", *Third Text* 26, no. 1 (January 2012): 17-28.

11

On Collivadino's Italian training see Giulia Murace, "Artista geniale e amico di tutti", in Nora Altridi and Carolina Vanegas Carrasco (eds.), *El taller de Collivadino* (Buenos Aires: UNSAM EDITA, 2019), 106-137.

Italy from 1890 to 1907, also participated in the next two Biennales.¹² In 1905 another Argentine artist (this time not the child of Italian emigrants, but rather the descendant of a Spanish and Argentine family), Cesáreo Bernaldo de Quirós, exhibited his *Ritorno dalla pesca* (Return from the fishing, 1905) in the International Room, a fishing scene set in a Mediterranean port (either Naples or Mallorca, where Bernaldo de Quirós lived at the time).¹³

The first Venezuelan artist to exhibit at the Biennale, the Impressionist Emilio (or Émile) Boggio, was, like Collivadino, the child of an Italian emigrant. Trained at the Académie Julien and living in France at the time, Boggio was described as “French” in the catalogue of the 1901 Venice Biennale, where he showed a painting titled *Labour* in the International Room.¹⁴ The first Mexican artist to exhibit at the Biennale (albeit in the Spanish Room) was the Symbolist Ángel Zárraga, who in 1910 presented two works: a sensual interpretation of a biblical scene, *Marta e Maria* (Martha and Mary), and a triptych entitled *Isabella, Pietro e Pastora* (Isabella, Pietro and Pastora).¹⁵ The latter, which Zárraga had painted while living in Toledo (Spain), had already been exhibited to great acclaim at the 1909 Munich Secession – an institution whose organisation and aesthetic preferences had a profound effect on the early Biennales.¹⁶

After World War I and under the secretariat of Vittorio Pica (1922–1927), Latin American artists continued to exhibit – albeit sporadically – at the Venice Biennale. In 1920, at least two avant-garde Argentine artists exhibited at the Biennale: Futurist Emilio Pettoruti and the Nabis Guillermo Butler.¹⁷ In this same year, the Cuban-born Federico Armando Beltran-Masses became the first artist born in Spanish America to have a solo exhibition at the Biennale.¹⁸

Pica’s administration should also be credited with spearheading the first official national representation of a Latin American country at the Biennale: the Argentine Room at the 1922 Biennale. In this 13th Biennale, thirty works by Argentine painters and sculptors were displayed in a dedicated room in the Central Pavilion.¹⁹ Argentina was thus the third non-European country (after Japan and the USA) to have a national presence at the Venice Biennale. [Fig. 1]

The success of the *Exhibition of Argentine Artists* led to more sustained contact between the Biennale and Argentine art authorities. Just before the 1922 Biennale closed, the organisers contacted the Biennale administration and asked

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Collivadino returned to Argentina in 1908 and from that year to 1936 would be the director of Buenos Aires’ Escuela Nacional de Bellas Artes. On Collivadino’s career see Laura Malosetti Costa, “Pío Collivadino y la Academia de Bellas Artes en Buenos Aires”, *Revista Ciencia y Cultura* 23, no. 43 (December 2019): 283–295.

13

Sesta Esposizione Internazionale d’Arte della città di Venezia (Venice: Premiato Stabilimento di Carlo Ferrari, 1905), 22.

14

Quarta Esposizione Internazionale d’Arte della Città di Venezia (Venice: Premiato Stabilimento di Carlo Ferrari, 1901), 48. When no date is provided for the works mentioned, their location and production date are unknown; the given titles are those indicated on the Biennale catalogue.

15

Nona Esposizione Internazionale d’Arte della città di Venezia (Venice: Premiato Stabilimento di Carlo Ferrari, 1910), 28.

16

Rodolfo Panichi, “Ángel Zárraga”, *Vita d’arte* III, vol. VI, no. 32 (August 1910): 52–65.

17

Dodicesima Esposizione Internazionale d’Arte della città di Venezia (Venezia: Bestetti e Tumminelli, 1920), 21; 89 and 92.

18

Dodicesima Esposizione Internazionale d’Arte della città di Venezia, 22.

19

The most complete reconstructions of this episode are Alonso Rodrigo, *Berni y las representaciones argentinas en la Bienal de Venecia* (Buenos Aires: Fundación Amalia Lacroze de Fortabat, 2013) and especially Pierpaolo Luderin, “La Mostra degli Artisti Argentini alla Biennale di Venezia del 1922”, *Quaderni della donazione Eugenio Da Venezia*, no. 22 (2015): 41–61. See also María Teresa Spinetto, “El arte argentino busca su lugar en el mundo”, in María Inés Saavedra (ed.), *Buenos Aires: artes plásticas, artistas y espacio público 1900–1930* (Buenos Aires: Vestales, 2008), 171–205 and Paola Natalia Pepa, “L’Argentina alla Biennale d’arte di Venezia”, in Stefania Portinari and Nico Stringa (eds.), *Storie della Biennale di Venezia* (Venezia: Edizioni Ca’ Foscari, 2019), 305–317.

fig. 1
El arte argentino en la
Exposición de Venecia, Caras y
Caretas, 1243 (July 29, 1922).



Distintos aspectos de la sala donde los artistas argentinos expusieron sus cuadros y esculturas.

EL A R T E A R G E N T I N O



Ha sido una jornada auspiciosa para el arte argentino la inauguración de la sala en que nuestros pintores y escultores exponían algunas de sus mejores obras. Los comentarios que la crítica y el público asistente a la exposición han hecho acerca del



El ministro argentino en Italia, doctor Angel Gallardo, con el director del Museo Nacional de Bellas Artes, doctor Cupertino del Campo, el señor Alfredo González Gancedo y otros señores en el acto de la inauguración.

EN LA EXPOSICION DE VENECIA



mérito artístico de lo expuesto, bien puede constituir un motivo de justa satisfacción para sus autores, porque esos comentarios, además de lo que puede haber de cortesía, han surgido a raíz de temidas comparaciones, y de ahí su positivo y alto valor.

for a space in the Giardini to set up an Argentine pavilion.²⁰ [Fig. 2] The pavilion was originally scheduled to open in 1924. At that time, only European countries had permanent spaces at the Biennale: Belgium, Great Britain, Germany, Hungary, Spain, Holland, and Russia. Had it opened then, the “Padiglione Argentino” would have been the first non-European pavilion at the Biennale, as the US did not yet have its own space there. However, despite the enthusiasm of the Argentine art world and Biennale officials, a lack of economic support for the pavilion’s construction from Argentine congressmen stalled negotiations.²¹ The Argentine pavilion was not ready for the 1924 Biennale, nor for the ones of 1926 and 1928.²² In 1929, the Biennale finally informed the Argentine organisers that the space originally reserved for their pavilion would be occupied by the new US Pavilion.²³ Argentina had missed its opportunity to have a permanent space at the Biennale, but as it will be demonstrated, the Biennale administration still considered the presence of artists from the Americas a priority.

Antonio Maraini’s Biennale: “a Geneva for International Contemporary Art”

Under the secretariat of Antonio Maraini, sculptor, art critic, and (after 1932) “Commissario straordinario” of the Fascist Fine Arts Syndicate, the Biennale made a sustained effort to increase the number of countries it represented.²⁴ As Massimo De Sabbata put it, the Italian press stressed “art as an instrument of peaceful coexistence among peoples and [the] Biennale as the most accredited place achieving this aspiration”.²⁵ Art and diplomacy, to quote the title of De Sabbata’s book, were the two poles of Maraini’s vision for the Biennale.

Until the invasion of Ethiopia in 1935 and the subsequent sanctions imposed on Italy by the League of Nations, Maraini conceived of the Biennale as an allegedly neutral and non-partisan space for international cultural diplomacy. As he wrote to Mussolini’s secretary in 1932,

I would like to draw His [Mussolini’s] attention to the fact that the conclusion of the [1932] Congress of Contemporary Art was to consider Venice as “a Geneva for international contemporary art” [...]. And if I dare say so much it is because it was He who said in one of the audiences granted to me, that this is what the Biennale should aim at.²⁶

For Maraini, the inclusion of as many countries as possible on the Biennale site was part of the diplomatic role he envisioned for himself and for the institution he headed. The opening of the US pavilion in 1930 was a particularly significant step in this respect, as was the fact that the Biennale attempted to become the preeminent

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Francesco Armellini to Romolo Bazzoni, December 4, 1922, “Padiglione della Repubblica Argentina”, Fondo Storico, Padiglioni, atti 1897-1893 (serie cosiddetta Scatole nere. Padiglioni), b.15. Archivio Storico delle Arti Contemporanee, Biennale di Venezia (Venezia), from now on ASAC—SNP, b.15; “Pabellón argentino en Venecia. Su próxima erección”, *La Prensa* (November 13, 1923).

21

Telegram from Esposizione Internazionale di Venezia to Martin Noel, October 8, 1923, “Padiglione della Repubblica Argentina”, ASAC—SNP, b.15.

22

See documents in “Padiglione della Repubblica Argentina”, ASAC—SNP, b.15.

23

Commissario Straordinario al Comune di Venezia to Fernando Pérez, Ambassador of Argentina to the Italian Kingdom, September 20, 1929, “Padiglione della Repubblica Argentina”, ASAC—SNP, b.15.

24

On Maraini’s Biennales see Giuliana Tomasella, *Biennali di guerra: arte e propaganda negli anni del conflitto, 1939-1944* (Padova: Il poligrafo, 2001); Massimo De Sabbata, *Tra diplomazia e arte: le biennali di Antonio Maraini (1928-1942)* (Udine: Forum, 2006).

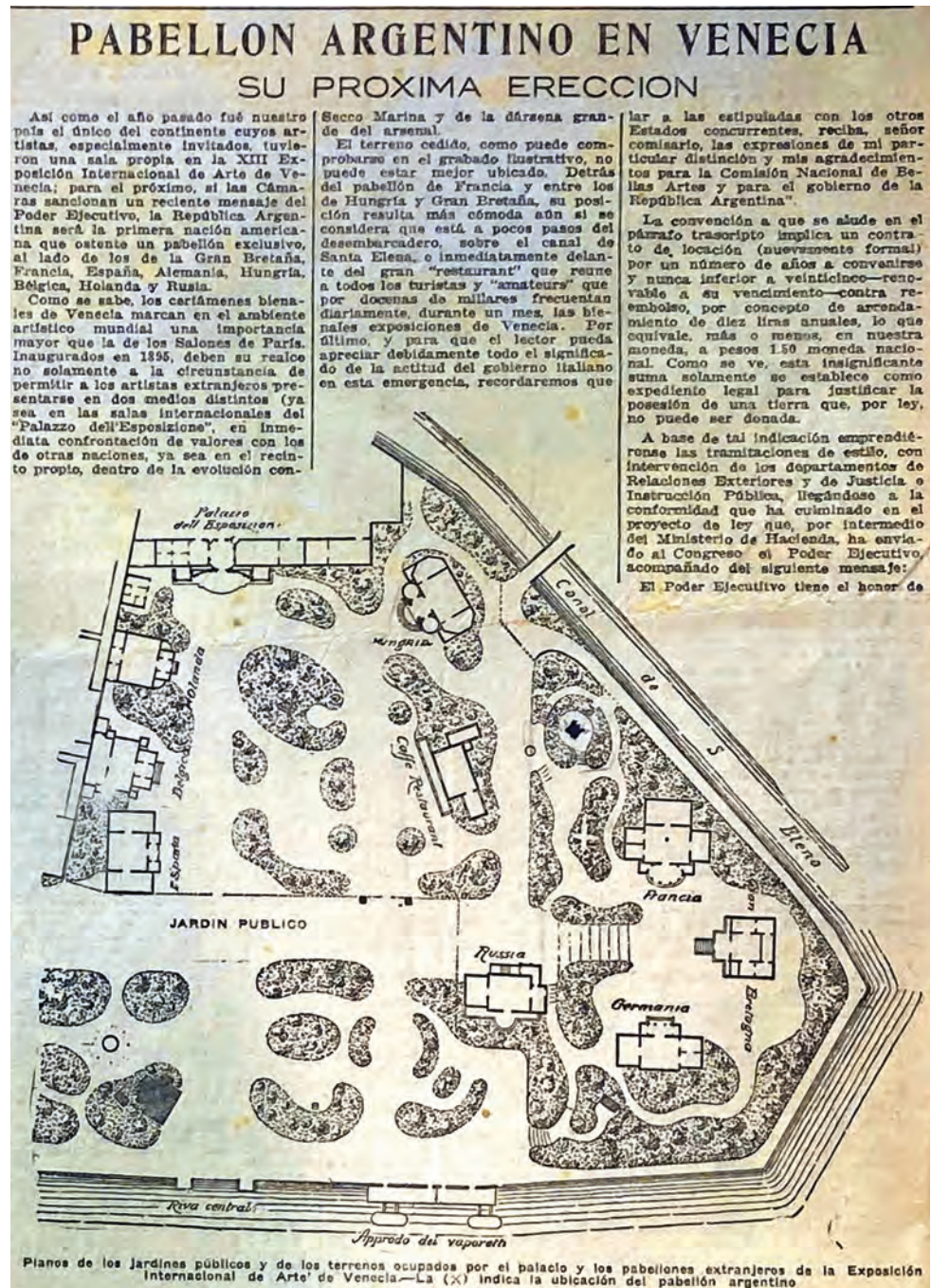
25

De Sabbata, *Tra diplomazia e arte: le biennali di Antonio Maraini (1928-1942)*, 28. All translations hereafter, unless otherwise noted, are by the author.

26

Antonio Maraini to Guido Beer, May 12, 1932, Archivio Centrale dello Stato, Presidenza Consiglio dei Ministri 1934-1936, b.14.1.283.

fig. 2
Pabellón argentino en Venecia.
La Prensa (November 13, 1923).



organiser of exhibitions of contemporary Italian art abroad, after almost a decade in which this task had been carried out by private individuals such as Margherita Sarfatti or by a section of the Ministry of Public Education.²⁷ These exhibitions organised by the Biennale abroad (for instance in Vienna in 1933, in Paris in 1935, or in Berlin in 1937) had, as Sileno Salvagnini writes, “foreign policy intentions, through which the supremacy of Fascist Italy was also demonstrated in the [art] field”.²⁸ For Maraini, the Biennale was to be not only the preeminent institution tasked with hosting international art in Italy, but also the one in charge of carefully shaping the view of contemporary Italian art promoted abroad.

Therefore, in Maraini’s vision, cultural relations between Italy and Latin America were to have two directions: the promotion of Italian art in Latin American countries, on the one hand, and the presentation of Latin American art at the Biennale, on the other. The former was a pressing concern for many members of the Italian art world, who, since the 1920s, had noticed that while there was a flourishing art market in cities such as Buenos Aires, São Paulo, or Rio de Janeiro, it was mostly focused on French, German, or Spanish art; Italy lagged behind in marketing its artistic production abroad. In the case of Argentina, projects such as the Italian section of the 1910 *Centennial Exhibition*, the 1923 *Italian Fine Arts Exhibition* or Sarfatti’s *Novecento show* (all held in Buenos Aires) aimed to encourage local collectors to acquire Italian art.²⁹ In ideal continuity with this project of promoting Italy’s art abroad, Maraini’s Biennale was originally intended to organise an exhibition of contemporary Italian painting and sculpture in Buenos Aires, which finally opened in 1938, but was limited to the decorative arts.³⁰ Another was planned for 1940, but Italy’s declaration of war on France and Great Britain prevented it from taking place. In the end, despite these numerous projects to promote Italian art in Latin America, during the Fascist regime the Biennale was only responsible for two exhibitions of Italian engravings and prints in the region. These toured Central and South America in 1939 – although of the five countries that had been asked to take part in the Padiglione dell’America Latina, it only visited Mexico.³¹

As part of the diplomatic purview of the early Maraini administration, in preparation for the 1930 Biennial there were several failed attempts to include Latin American art in the Biennale. In 1929, for example, a last-ditch attempt was made to persuade Argentina to finally provide the funds needed to build its pavilion, but to no avail.³² Mexico was invited to participate in the 1930 Biennial, but negotia-

27

Giuliana Tomasella, “La Biennale di Venezia. Le mostre all'estero”, ON. *Otto/Novecento* 1 (1996): 48-53; Sileno Salvagnini, *Il sistema delle arti in Italia 1919-1943* (Bologna: Minerva, 2000), 75-85; Lia Durante, “Mostre all'estero della Biennale di Venezia”, in *Quaderni della Donazione Eugenio da Venezia* 15 (2005), 91-100; Francesca Cavarocchi, *Avanguardie dello spirito: il fascismo e la propaganda culturale all'estero* (Roma: Carocci, 2010), 185-193; Chiara Fabi, “Arte e Propaganda: l'identità del regime nelle mostre d'arte all'estero, 1935-1937”. In *MODERNIDADE LATINA Os Italianos e os Centros do Modernismo Latino-americano. Anais Museu de Arte Contemporânea da Universidade de São Paulo*, 2014, <http://www.mac.usp.br/mac/conteudo/academico/publicacoes/anaais/modernidade/conteudo.html> (accessed July 2022).

28

Sileno Salvagnini, *Il sistema delle arti in Italia 1919-1943*, 79.

29

María Isabel Baldasarre, “La otra inmigración. Buenos Aires y el mercado del arte italiano a comienzos del siglo XX”, *Mitteilungen des Kunsthistorischen Institutes in Florenz* 51, no. 3/4 (2007): 477-502; Laura Moure Cecchini, “A Fascist Tango in Argentina: Novecento Italiano in Buenos Aires, 1930”, *Oxford Art Journal* 45, no. 3 (December 2022): 359-381.

30

Lamberto Lattanzi, “Aspetti dell'arte sacra all'esposizione italiana di arte decorativa a Buenos Aires”, *Osservatore Romano* (Rome, September 30, 1938).

31

It also visited Mexico: *Mostra italiana di incisioni organizzata dal Ministero della Cultura Popolare d'intesa con i ministeri degli Affari Esteri e dell'Educazione Nazionale, a cura della Biennale* (Venice: Biennale di Venezia, 1939).

32

Commissario Straordinario al Comune di Venezia to Fernando Pérez, Ambassador of Argentina to the Italian Kingdom, September 20, 1929, “Padiglione della Repubblica Argentina”, ASAC – SNP, b.15.

tions seemed to have stalled prematurely and came to nothing.³³ The Venetian painter Cesare Mainella, who was working in Peru at the time, proposed the creation of a “small room” of Peruvian artists at the 1930 Biennial. But in this instance, unlike the cases of Argentina and Mexico, the Biennale was not interested in the project: as Romolo Bazzoni, the Biennale’s administrator, wrote to Maraini, “the issue is suspended for lack of space, since many other nations that do not have their own pavilions have also asked to exhibit”.³⁴ The consequences of these fiascos were far-reaching: to this day, neither Argentina, nor Mexico, nor Perù has a permanent building in the Biennale, instead having temporary spaces in the Arsenale.

All these attempts having failed, the last try on the part of the Maraini administration to include Latin American countries at the Biennale took place in preparation for its 1932 iteration.³⁵ Celebrating the tenth anniversary of the March on Rome, the 28th Esposizione Biennale Internazionale d’Arte brought to fruition the changes planned by the Maraini-Giuseppe Volpi di Misurata administration, which aspired to fascisticise the Biennale and to turn it into a state-organised exhibition (rather than a municipal one, as it had originally been).³⁶ With a new modernist façade by architect Duilio Torres, this Biennale also saw the inauguration of the Venice International Film Festival and of the first Congress of Contemporary Art, expanding Venice’s scope as the venue for international debates on an expanded definition of art.

“Latin America” and *latinità* during the interwar period

The 1932 Biennale had the highest number, until then, of foreign countries with their own pavilion, thirteen; the expansion of the international participation was Maraini’s utmost priority. It was for this reason, then, that the Biennale officials decided to include Latin American artists in the 1932 iteration.

Perhaps remembering the labyrinthine negotiations with Argentina and the lack of space in the Giardini, the Biennale did not encourage the creation of individual national pavilions, but rather a single one, the Padiglione dell’America Latina. This was a highly unusual step in the Biennale’s history: there was, of course, no “European Pavilion” – “art” was considered at the time to be an “unmarked case, implicitly representing “European” art – but neither was there one for North America, Africa, Asia, or Oceania. At the Biennale, pavilions observed strict national boundaries – and changed when they did: see, for example, the case of the Austrian pavilion after Hitler’s Anschluss: no longer an independent nation, Austria did not participate in the 1940 or 1942 Biennales. The only exception at that time was the USSR pavilion, which included all the nations under the aegis of the Soviet Union.³⁷

Conceptually, however, the Padiglione dell’America Latina was a different proposition from that of the USSR. Mexico, Argentina, Uruguay, Chile, and Brazil, the countries that would each have a room in this pavilion, were politically

33

Gustavo Pulitzer Finali to Antonio Maraini, “Messico”, ASAC – SNP, b. 15. Mexico would have its first national participation in the Biennale in 1950, with a well-received pavilion devoted to David Alfaro Siqueiros, José Clemente Orozco, Diego Rivera, and Rufino Tamayo. See Mario Sartor, “La fortuna critica di Diego Rivera in Italia”, *Il Veltro* 3-4 (August 1993): 329-355; Chiara Stella Sara Alberti, “Il Messico in Italia; Uno sguardo dal fondo de Micheli”, *Quaderni Culturali ILLA*, 1(1), 31-42; Alice Gerotto, “Diego Rivera, David Alfaro Siqueiros, José Clemente Orozco, e Rufino Tamayo. Mostre di arte messicana in Italia. Analisi di una fortuna critica dalla XXV Biennale del 1950”. (BA thesis: Ca’ Foscari University, Venice 2020).

34

Romolo Bazzoni to Antonio Maraini, 16 December 1929, “Peru”, ASAC – SNP, b. 15.

35

Tredicesima Esposizione Internazionale d’Arte (Venice: Premiato Stabilimento di Carlo Ferrari, 1932); *Le muse inquiete: la Biennale di Venezia di fronte alla storia* (Venice: Archivio storico delle arti contemporanee, 2020).

36

On these changes see Maria Stone, “Challenging Cultural Categories: The Transformation of the Venice Biennale under Fascism”, *Journal of Modern Italian Studies* 4, no. 2 (1999): 184-208.

37

Matteo Bertelé, *Arte sovietica alla Biennale di Venezia* (Milan: Mimesis Edizioni, 2020).

and economically independent, with different histories and cultures. Four were Spanish-speaking, one was Portuguese-speaking. Four were in South America, one, Mexico, in Central America. Although all three under Spanish rule in the colonial period, what is now Uruguay and Argentina were part of the Viceroyalty of the Río de la Plata, while most of modern Chile was part of the Capitanía General de Chile; Brazil, of course, was part of the Portuguese Empire.

In fact, “Latin America” is a Euro-centric term that homogenises very different geopolitical entities. As historian Mauricio Tenorio Trillo puts it, “[Latin America] has never been a real place, a clear civilisation, or a well-demarcated and unique culture or group of cultures”.³⁸ The concept of *latinité* was originally developed by French intellectual Michel Chevalier in 1836 on the eve of the first French military intervention in Mexico. *Latinité* was intended to justify France’s cultural and political influence in the region and to counter the growing expansionism of the United States.

After the independence of the former colonies of the Spanish Empire, the term was often appropriated by creole elites to mark their difference from the indigenous and African populations of the region, as well as to diminish the influence of Spain – associated with a shameful past of colonial occupation and oppression – and to enhance that of France – associated instead with modernity and positivist values. In the early 20th century, however, *latinidad* (latinity) was often also a term that implied the defence of *mestizaje* (racial mixture) and a new, synthetic, racially mixed identity.

Further destabilising the category of Latin America has been the role played by Brazil in its conceptual construction: does this country, despite its different history and language from the former Spanish colonies on the continent, share enough characteristics with them to be considered part of Latin America? Do former Spanish and Portuguese colonies have ties that lead to a common Iberian identity? Should linguistic, geographical and cultural differences between Brazil and the rest of Latin America be emphasised or played down?³⁹ The tensions surrounding the idea of Latin America, but also the usefulness of the concept to describe the similarities between certain nations and their differences, on the one hand, with respect to Europe and, on the other, with respect to the United States, have led the French historian Guy Martinière to call for the use of Latin America as a mere “operational concept”.⁴⁰

In early 20th-century Italy, the concept of *latinità* (latinity) acquired other meanings that need to be addressed in order to understand the Biennale’s decision to propose a Padiglione dell’America Latina. The term was prominently used in the interventionist press during World War I in opposition to the idea of *germanità* (germanism). *Latinità* served to encourage Italians to intervene in the war on the side of the Allies on the basis of a supposed common cultural tradition between Italy and France.⁴¹ After the First World War, “latinità” was used to express the idea of a Latin racial “essence” purportedly shared by Italy and Latin American

38

Mauricio Tenorio-Trillo, *Latin America: The Allure and Power of an Idea* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2017), 1-2. For the history and conceptual problems attending such nomenclature, see Walter D Mignolo, *The Idea of Latin America* (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2008) and, most especially, Tenorio-Trillo’s aforementioned book, which addresses the encroachment of this concept in US academia.

39

For this issue, see “Does Brazil Belong to Latin America?” in Mari Carmen Ramírez and Thomas Ybarra-Fausto (eds.), *Resisting Categories: Latin American and/or Latino?* (New York: Yale University Press, 2012), 301-337; Afranio Coutinho, “¿Qué es América Latina?”, *Mundo Nuevo*, no. 36 (June 1969), 19-20; Darcy Ribeiro, “A América Latina existe?”, in *Ensaio insólitos* (Porto Alegre: L & PM Editores, 1979), 217- 225.

40

Guy Martinière, *Aspects de la coopération franco-brésilienne: Transplantation culturelle et stratégie de la modernité* (Paris: Éditions de la Maison des Sciences de l’homme, 1982), 25-37.

41

Rosario Romeo, “La Germania e la vita intellettuale italiana dall’Unità alla Prima guerra mondiale”, in *L’Italia unita e la prima guerra mondiale* (Roma-Bari: Laterza, 1978), 109-41; Luisa Mangoni, *Una crisi fine secolo: la cultura italiana e la Francia fra Otto e Novecento* (Torino: G. Einaudi, 1985); and Seamus Dunn and T. G. Fraser, *Europe and ethnicity: The First World War and contemporary ethnic conflict* (London: Routledge, 1996).

countries, which supposedly justified Italy's role as the leader of the "Latin race" and its political and economic intervention in the Spanish and Portuguese-speaking countries of Central and South America. The actual content of *latinità*, however, was extremely vague, including signifiers such as Catholicism, the Baroque, the Latin roots of Spanish and Portuguese, and the presence of Italian emigrant communities across the Atlantic.

Emboldened by this fictional Latin "essence", fascist officials saw the region as ripe for commercial and cultural intervention.⁴² In the 1920s and early 1930s, the creation of institutions such as the Istituto Cristoforo Colombo (1923), the launch of journals such as *Rivista d'Italia e d'America* (1923-1928), *Vie d'Italia e dell'America Latina* (1924-1932) and *Colombo* (1926-1930), and the regular visits of many Italian intellectuals to Latin America (including Sarfatti, F. T. Marinetti and Pier Maria Bardi, for example) and Latin American intellectuals to Italy (José León Pagan and Eduardo Mallea, for example), aimed at further strengthening cultural, but also economic and political, ties between the Italian homeland and the Romance-language-speaking countries across the Atlantic. *Roma caput mundi* was seen as both a counterweight to the growing influence of the United States in the Americas and as an extension of Fascism's cultural influence across the Atlantic.⁴³

Because of the aforementioned "Latin" essence that Italy and the Spanish-speaking countries of the Americas supposedly shared, the Fascist regime adopted here a very different colonial strategy from the one it employed in Africa, one based on art and culture rather than military occupation and economic exploitation. In 1926, the Italian government severely restricted emigration to Latin America, as it was considered a national disgrace by the Fascist regime. Nevertheless, the aforementioned cultural enterprises – and the Biennale's Padiglione dell'America Latina – were meant to maintain ties with the existing Italian communities abroad, as well as with Latin American citizens in general. We should understand the unprecedented project of creating a permanent pavilion for Latin American countries at the Biennale within this geopolitical context.

The Padiglione dell'America Latina (1931-1932)

The Latin American Pavilion was meant to be located on the island of Sant'Elena, which Maraini conceived as an extension of the Giardini.⁴⁴ Here architect Brenno del Giudice designed a modernist structure to house the Padiglione Venezia (dedicated to the applied arts produced in Venice) and pavilions for Poland and Switzerland. In front of the pavilion was an elegant exedra around a pool of water, which was

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See João Fábio Bertonha, "Emigrazione e politica estera: la «diplomazia sovversiva» di Mussolini e la questione degli italiani all'estero, 1922-1945", *Altreltalie*, no. 23 (2001): 39-61; Eugenia Scarzanella, (ed.), *Fascisti in Sud America* (Firenze: Le Lettere, 2005); Franco Savarino Roggero, "'En busca de un 'eje' latino: la política latinoamericana de Italia entre las dos guerras mundiales,'" *Anuario del Centro de Estudios Históricos "Prof. Carlos S.A. Segreti"* 6, no. 16 (2006): 239-262; Federico Finchelstein, *Transatlantic Fascism: Ideology, Violence, and the Sacred in Argentina and Italy, 1919-1945* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010); David Aliano, *Mussolini's National Project in Argentina* (Madison: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 2012); Carla Brandalise, "O conceito de América Latina: hispano-americanos e a panlatinidade europeia", *Cuadernos del CILHA* 14, no. 1 (2013): 74-106; Carla Brandalise, "Fascismo italiano na América Latina: entre romanità e latinità", *Anos 90* 23, no. 43 (November 30, 2016): 199-233. See also Marco Mugnaini, *L'America Latina e Mussolini: Brasile e Argentina nella politica estera dell'Italia, 1919-1943* (Milano: FrancoAngeli, 2008).

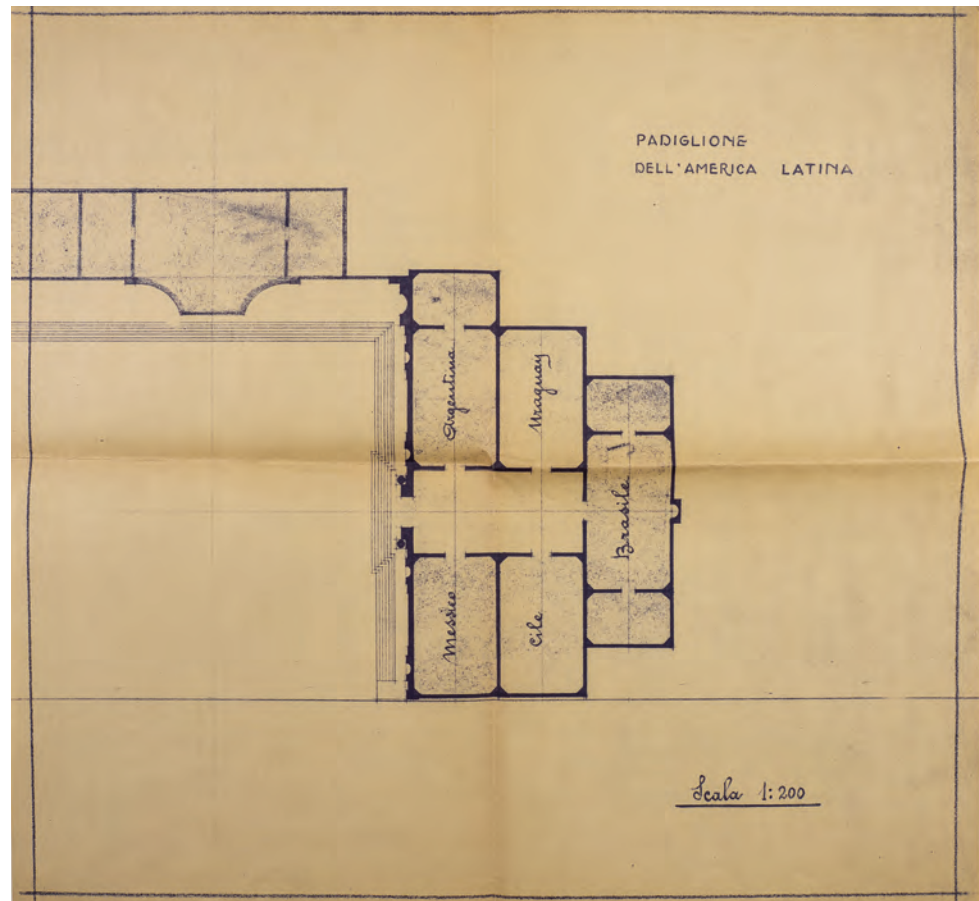
43

Paula Bruno and Rosa Aboy, *Visitas culturales en la Argentina: (1898-1936)* (Buenos Aires: Biblos, 2014); Paolo Rusconi, "Pietro Maria Bardi's First Journey to South America: A Narrative of Travel, Politics, and Architectural Utopia", in Valeria Galimi and Annarita Gori (eds.), *Intellectuals in the Latin Space during the Era of Fascism: Crossing Borders* (London: Routledge, 2020), 57-84; Laura Fotia, *Diplomazia culturale e propaganda attraverso l'Atlantico. Argentina e Italia (1923-1940)* (Florence: Le Monnier, 2019).

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Antonio Maraini, "La XVIII Biennale d'arte a Venezia", *Le Tre Venezie* VII, no. 8 (August 1931): 478-487.

fig. 3
Padiglione dell'America Latina.
"Disegni Padiglione + Scorcio
Giardini", ASAC – SNP, b.15, ©
La Biennale di Venezia



demolished in 1964 to make way for the Brazilian pavilion.⁴⁵ The Latin American Pavilion was to be located on the site of the present Greek pavilion, with five separate spaces devoted to Mexico, Argentina, Uruguay, Chile, and Brazil.⁴⁶ [Fig. 3].

For the Latin American pavilion project, the Biennial's main interlocutor was the sculptor Vicente Morelli, born in Naples but based in Uruguay – one of the many unofficial transatlantic cultural diplomats on whom the Biennial has often relied to forge links with foreign art worlds.⁴⁷ In January 1931, Morelli wrote to Maraini to inform him that the Italian Foreign Minister, Emilio Pagliano, was “enthusiastic” about the project to increase the number of pavilions at the Biennale that Morelli had presented to him, as it would be “of great benefit for the cultural exchange between Italy and Latin America”.⁴⁸ The next day Maraini received the following telegram from Pagliano:

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See Giovanni Bianchi, “Il Padiglione Venezia, uno spazio alla Biennale per le arti decorative”, *Quaderni della donazione Eugenio Da Venezia*, 14 (2005): 87-99; Giovanni Bianchi, “Brenno Del Giudice: una ‘moderna’ tradizione”, in Marina Docci and Maria Grazia Turco (eds.), *L'architettura dell'altra modernità* (Roma: Gangemi, 2010), 268-79; Vittorio Pajusco, “Brenno Del Giudice e Duilio Torres architetti della Biennale”, in Francesca Castellani, Martina Carraro, and Eleonora Charans (eds.), *Lo IUAV e la Biennale di Venezia: figure, scenari, strumenti* (Padova: Il Poligrafo, 2016), 29-48

⁴⁶

“Disegni Padiglione + Scorcio Giardini”, ASAC – SNP, b.15. The project for the Latin American pavilion is unsigned.

⁴⁷

“Vicente Morelli”, MNAV- Museo Nacional de Bellas Artes, <http://acervo.mnav.gub.uy/obras.php?q=na:639> (accessed July 2022). Morelli participated in the 1926 Biennale with his sculpture “Madonnina”: <http://asac.labiennale.org/it/passpres/artivisive/sem-ricerca.php?scheda=275305&p=1> (accessed July 2022).

⁴⁸

Vicente Morelli to Antonio Maraini, 20 January 1931, “Padiglione della Repubblica Argentina”, ASAC—SNP, b.15.

Mr. Vicente Morelli, Uruguayan painter [sic], reported that the management of this exposition would be willing to cede one or more pavilions to the governments of the Latin American republics. It would be appreciated to know the extent of the offer and its conditions.⁴⁹

Several letters in the Biennale archives written by Pagliano and the frequency with which he is mentioned in Morelli's letters demonstrate the importance of the Latin American pavilion for Italian diplomacy in the early 1930s. With this reassurance, the Biennale felt justified in directly inviting Argentina, Brazil, Chile, Mexico, and Uruguay to share a new pavilion in Sant'Elena. It is not entirely clear why these countries were singled out: they all had important Italian emigrant communities and were among the largest on the continent, but Peru and Venezuela also did and yet were not included in the Padiglione dell'America Latina. Artists from Argentina, Brazil and Mexico, as I have shown above, had already exhibited at the Biennial, but none from Chile and Uruguay. By sharing a pavilion, Argentina, Brazil, Chile, Mexico, and Uruguay would also share the cost of building it, while receiving all the facilities offered by the Biennial: free use of the site, assistance with transport, packing and unpacking of the works, as well as overseeing the pavilion and press publicity.⁵⁰ Invitations were sent out in July 1931.

A month later, the Argentine ambassador confirmed receipt of the invitation and assured Maraini that he would be in touch as soon as the Minister of Foreign Relations gave him precise instructions.⁵¹ In October 1931, Maraini received a negative reply from Argentina: despite the project being approved by the Argentine National Directorate of Fine Arts, the country had no funds to contribute to the Latin American pavilion at the Biennale, "even though participation in such a prestigious exhibition would be an honour for the nation and an encouragement for the exhibiting [artists]", as Argentine officials wrote.⁵²

The Chilean ambassador also acknowledged receipt of the Biennale's invitation, but there seems to have been no follow-up, as there are no further letters on the subject in the Biennale's archives.⁵³ The Biennale's archives also have no record of how Mexican officials reacted to the Latin American pavilion project, but they do have a copy of the Brazilian ambassador's letter to Maraini, in which he regretted (without further explanation) that "my government finds it impossible at this time to agree to contribute to the construction of the great Latin American pavilion, despite the importance of this exhibition".⁵⁴ We do not know from this laconic *communiqué* whether economic or geopolitical reasons, or rather Brazil's aforementioned reluctance to embrace the concept of Latin America, led the Brazilian authorities to refuse to participate in the Padiglione dell'America Latina.

The Biennale's archives contain a copy of the letter sent by the Uruguayan ambassador to Italy to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs recommending the country's participation in the Latin American pavilion, which gives us a valuable insight into how some of those involved saw the importance of this project for countries that aspired to geopolitical importance and yet struggled to have a significant artistic presence in Europe. The Latin American Pavilion, as the Uruguayan ambassador wrote, "would offer painters and sculptors from our country a regular opportunity to present their works in the international arena that characterises the

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Emilio Pagliano to Antonio Maraini, January 21, 1931, "Padiglione della Repubblica Argentina", ASAC—SNP, b.15.

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Biennale di Venezia to unknown, February 19, 1931, "Padiglione della Repubblica Argentina", ASAC—SNP, b.15.

51

Fernando Pérez to Antonio Maraini, August 22, 1931, "Padiglione della Repubblica Argentina", ASAC—SNP, b.15.

52

Ministerio de Justicia e Instrucción Pública de la Nación Argentina, October 31, 1931, "Padiglione della Repubblica Argentina", ASAC—SNP, b.15.

53

F. Figueroa to Antonio Maraini, September 10, 1931, "Chile", ASAC – SNP, b.15.

54

Ambassade du Brésil to Antonio Maraini, October 7, 1931, "Brazil". ASAC – SNP, b.15.

Biennale, and to have them judged in competition with those of European exhibitors”, a long-standing ambition of Latin American artists. “The realisation of this project”, the Ambassador continued, “would also contribute to the effective intensification of our cultural relations with Italy”⁵⁵ – the Biennale was thus both an international environment and a space for cultivating bilateral relations; not really a neutral “Geneva of the arts”, but rather the genteel face of Mussolini’s international politics. A few months later, however, the Uruguayan artistic authorities (like their Argentinean counterparts) rejected the invitation because it came “at such a distressing time for our national finances, which is the reason why its crystallisation into a beautiful reality will be postponed for who knows how long”.⁵⁶

Morelli had anticipated, in a letter to Maraini, that economic difficulties might trouble the project of the Padiglione dell’America Latina: “The crisis has spread to all those rich republics, and this may stop our enterprise for the time being – but it will pass”, he wrote at the end of 1931.⁵⁷ He was probably thinking of the effects of the Great Depression as well as the political instability that plagued the region throughout the 1930s. In retrospect, the violent regime changes in Argentina, Chile, Brazil, and Uruguay, and the unstable short presidency of Pascual Ortiz Rubio in Mexico (1930-1932), made any form of collaboration between these countries on a cultural project in Europe virtually impossible. It is not clear whether the Biennale officials ignored Latin America’s economic and political conditions, or whether they thought they would be overcome in the interest of establishing cultural relations with the Fascist regime. In any case, it was clear that the priorities of the art worlds of Argentina, Chile, Brazil, Mexico, and Uruguay lay elsewhere at the time.

Nevertheless, Morelli did not lose faith in the Latin American pavilion project – for example, he suggested to Maraini that Argentina, Brazil, Chile, Mexico, and Uruguay be invited to participate in the International Congress of Contemporary Art organised during the 1932 Biennale. Even if they could not actually take part, as Morelli wrote,

it would be an opportunity for these republics to keep the Venice Biennale in mind, and at the same time for them to see how the Biennale, despite the impossibility of the moment that prevents these republics from building their pavilion, always keeps them in mind [...], which I think will be appreciated by South American artists.⁵⁸

In February 1932, Morelli wrote again to the Biennale:

The crisis in Latin America is quite serious – but I have faith that this situation will soon improve and that we will still be able to reconsider the pavilion [...] We are at the beginning of [19]32 and we still have two years ahead of us. Hope is not lost.⁵⁹

Maraini agreed with Morelli that inviting Latin American representatives to the Congress was a good idea – and Morelli suggested also inviting Latin American ambassadors to the opening of the 1932 Biennale since

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Ubaldo Ramón Guerra to Juan Carlos Blanco, (July 29, 1931), “Uruguay”, ASAC–SNP, b. 15.

56

Domingo Bazzurro to Antonio Maraini, September 12, 1931, “Uruguay”, ASAC–SNP, b. 15.

57

Vicente Morelli to Antonio Maraini, November 20, 1931, “Padiglione della Repubblica Argentina”, ASAC–SNP, b. 15.

58

Vicente Morelli to Antonio Maraini, undated end of 1931–early 1932, “Padiglione della Repubblica Argentina”, ASAC–SNP, b. 15.

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Vicente Morelli to Antonio Maraini, 8 February 1932, “Padiglione della Repubblica Argentina”, ASAC–SNP, b. 15.

almost all [the Ambassadors] have recently changed and perhaps most of them are not familiar with the exhibition and if they go to Venice they will see “de visu” the grandeur and importance [of the Biennale] and of our project”.⁶⁰

Acting as veritable diplomats, both Maraini and Morelli believed that the ‘soft power’ of art could help Latin American representatives understand Italy’s institutions and build broad support for the Fascist regime’s economic and political aims in the region.

Morelli continued to work tirelessly on the Latin American Pavilion project with his Uruguayan contacts. In March 1932, he sent an official letter to Maraini asking for further clarification on the Padiglione dell’America Latina: would it be possible to avoid the expense of building a new pavilion by using an existing one? (A hand-written note from the Biennale laconically replied: “At the moment there is no such pavilion”). Morelli concluded on a hopeful note:

I am pleased that the country of the promoter of this beautiful project is the first to take an interest in it, and I hope that, like Uruguay, the other four Latin American countries invited to participate will decide to ensure that our aspiration is realised at the 1934 Biennale, both in the name of art and for a greater artistic and cultural understanding between the countries of Latin America and this most noble nation.⁶¹

1932 was the year in which Uruguay’s economic crisis, linked to the 1929 crash, reached its climax, and it was also the year in which President Gabriel Terra pushed for the constitutional reform that he would finally impose in 1933 with a “march on Montevideo” inspired by Mussolini’s “march on Rome” of 1922. None of these economic or political aspects, however, emerge from Morelli and Maraini’s correspondence: cultural diplomacy in this case functions as a veritable strategy of obfuscation for Italian and Uruguayan geopolitical interests.

And yet the “Pavilion of Latin America” was not to be. The last attempt to include an official Latin American representation at the Venice Biennale during Maraini’s Secretariat was a project spearheaded by the Italian ambassador in Brazil, Vittorio Cerruti, in 1932. The year 1932 was the fiftieth anniversary of Giuseppe Garibaldi’s death and the Fascist regime sponsored several celebrations and public ceremonies that were incorporated into the festivities for the tenth anniversary of the March on Rome.⁶² Garibaldi’s politics, however, were quite controversial from a Fascist point of view, so much of these celebrations centred on the figure of his Brazilian wife Anita, whose remains were buried in Rome and who was commemorated with a new monument on the Gianicolo, inaugurated by Mussolini in June 1932. As part of these celebrations, Cerruti encouraged Italian emigrants in Brazil to finance some form of tribute to Anita. But instead of a “modest monument to Anita in Rio de Janeiro”, Cerruti wrote to the industrialist Giuseppe Volpi di Misurata (president of the Biennale),

I had thought that it would be nice, on behalf of the Italian community in Brazil, to offer this government a permanent pavilion at the Venice Biennale, a pavilion that could be erected in the name of

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Ibid.

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Vicente Morelli to Antonio Maraini, March 10, 1932, “Padiglione della Repubblica Argentina”, ASAC—SNP, b. 15.

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For the contentious appropriation of Garibaldi’s myth on the part of fascism see Mario Isnenghi, “Usi politici di Garibaldi, dall’interventismo al fascismo”, *Rivista di storia contemporanea* XI, no. 4 (1982): 513-522; Claudio Fogu, “Fascism and Historic Representation: The 1932 Garibaldian Celebrations”, *Journal of Contemporary History* 31, no. 2 (1996): 317-345; Eva Cecchinato, “Modello guerriero o eredità ideale? La tradizione garibaldina tra appropriazioni fasciste e recuperi antifascisti”, *Transalpina. Études italiennes*, no. 15 (December 7, 2012): 119-138.

Anita Garibaldi and that would remain as a worthy monument of the gratitude of the Italians who found ample hospitality in this country. Brazilian artists, so many of whom are children of our blood, would have had an incentive to produce ever better works, knowing that they would be able to exhibit them at the greatest art exhibition in the world. On the other hand, the Brazilian government would have had reason to be grateful to the Italians living here for the gift they received and, above all, for the great influence that their presence at the Venice Biennale would have had on Brazilian art.⁶³

But the funds that Cerruti was able to collect from Italian emigrants in Brazil were not enough to build an independent pavilion at the Giardini. Despite the Biennale's enthusiasm for Cerruti's project, this too remained unfulfilled. Like the other Latin American countries mentioned above, Brazil would have to wait decades to attain national representation at the Biennale. Its pavilion on the island of Santa Elena was inaugurated in 1964, although the creation of the Bienal de São Paulo in 1951 (spearheaded by a child of Italian emigrants, Francisco "Ciccillo" Matarazzo) perhaps better fulfilled the aims of Italian-Brazilian friendship outlined in Cerruti's letter. Brazil and Uruguay, which inaugurated its pavilion in 1960, are the only countries originally invited to be part of the Padiglione dell'America Latina that today have a permanent building at the Biennale.

Conclusion

Although Latin American artists continued to exhibit sporadically during the last years of the Maraini administration, the Biennale did not pursue the construction of permanent pavilions for these countries at this time. After the invasion of Ethiopia and the sanctions imposed on Italy by the League of Nations, pan-American politics gained momentum, aligning Latin American nations with the United States rather than with the transatlantic networks envisioned by the Italian fascists. During the Second World War, contrary to what fascist ideologues in Italy had hoped throughout the 1920s and 1930s, all of Latin America (with the exception of Argentina) immediately sided with the Allies against Germany, Italy, and Japan.

However, the idea of a Latin American Pavilion was taken up again in very different geopolitical circumstances in 1972, when the first 'Padiglione dell'Istituto Italo-Latinoamericano' was inaugurated at the Biennale. This pavilion opened regularly at the Biennale from 1986 to 2015. By the 1970s, the idea of 'Latin America' – as a geopolitical entity identified with the Non-Aligned/Third World bloc – was accepted as a given by many European intellectuals and art critics, for whom the region's cultural production was relevant only in so far as it had a strong anti-US imperialist thrust. However, despite being curated by Latin American critics in several of its iterations, the IILA pavilion was not directly managed by Latin American countries. The Istituto Italo-Latinoamericano is an intergovernmental body based in Italy, founded in 1966 thanks to Amintore Fanfani, the Italian Foreign Minister and President of the 20th UN General Assembly that year. The fact that it is managed by an institution based in Italy, rather than granting autonomy to Latin American countries directly, makes the "Padiglione dell'Istituto Italo-Latinoamericano" very different from the Padiglione dell'America Latina envisaged by Morelli and Maraini, although, like the latter, it remains a diplomatic project disguised as a cultural one.⁶⁴ In other ways, however, the "Padiglione dell'ILAA" was the heir to its unrealised inter-war predecessor, in that it sought to provide a space for artists from Latin

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Vittorio Cerruti to Giuseppe Volpi di Misurata, June 14, 1932, "Brasile", ASAC – SNP, b.15.

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Simone Zacchini, "Il Padiglione dell'Istituto Italo-Latino Americano alla Biennale di Venezia. Storia di un progetto d'identità culturale", *Quaderni Culturali IILA* 1, no. 1 (2019): 85-99.

American countries who were still struggling to gain a foothold at the Biennale, and to broaden its scope to include countries that were often absent from the radar of the Italian (and international) art world.

Nevertheless, the “Padiglione dell’IILA”, in its various iterations, often addressed the vexed notion of what, exactly, “Latin America” signified. Such a notion seems to have been considered unproblematic and straightforward in the inter-war period, as the correspondence of Biennale officials contains no reflections explaining why the Padiglione dell’America Latina included certain countries rather than others, or what characteristics the art of all these nations actually shared – it is interesting that in the Biennale documents I have consulted on this matter, there is no reference to a single Latin American artist, even though by the 1930s there was a fairly long history of painters and sculptors from that region participating in the Biennale. It was the geopolitical importance of the region, rather than an authentic interest in giving a stage to a specifically Latin American aesthetic, that guided the Biennale’s efforts in the 1930s. It is crucial to acknowledge that the Italians’ very superficial knowledge of the political cultures and histories of Latin America, and more specifically of the art worlds of these nations, doomed projects such as the Padiglione dell’America Latina from the outset – even if episodes such as these might force us to note the importance of emigrants’ interpersonal and social networks in shaping the Venice Biennale.

The idea of the nation-state has been challenged from many quarters, and its contested nature is one of the most common criticisms directed at the organisation of the Venice Biennale. Yet the demise of the ‘Padiglione dell’ILAA’ shows that as Latin American art thrives in the globalised art world, it is on a national basis (rather than around the mostly fictional notion of “Latin American art”) that artists from the region prefer to exhibit at the Venice Biennale. In the 2024 Biennale, for example, ten of the twenty-one Romance-speaking countries of the Americas were represented with either permanent or temporary pavilions. This very multiplicity forces us once again to consider the Biennale as a laboratory of globalisation, as well as a space of resistance to totalising narratives and the promotion of difference.⁶⁵

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Anthony Gardner and Charles Green, “Biennials of the South on the Edges of the Global”, *Third Text* 27, no. 4 (July 2013): 442-445.

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	Latin America at the Venice Biennale: Histories of Unrealised National Pavilions Anita Orzes Abstract The article reconstructs the histories of Latin American national pavilions, which, between 1948 and 1972, had the opportunity to build a distinctly national architecture at the Giardini but ultimately did not. By consulting unpublished documentation and analysing the cross-history of the Giardini and its pavilions, this investigation contributes to the little-explored field of research of unrealised pavilions and shows how these failed attempts are part of the dynamics and difficulties of the structure of the Venice Biennale. Furthermore, the research brings to light a complex map of political and cultural issues that interweaves the vicissitudes and choices of both the countries (Argentina and Mexico) and intergovernmental institutions (Cartagena Agreement countries), which did not obtain a permanent venue, alongside those that were successful in erecting a national pavilion (Brazil, Venezuela, and Uruguay). Keywords Latin American Pavilions, Brazil Pavilion, Mexico Pavilion, Argentina Pavilion, Venice Biennale		
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Latin America at the Venice Biennale: Histories of Unrealised National Pavilions¹

Anita Orzes

The Giardini di Castello (hereafter: Giardini) are “a micro-city where history is reflected in the details of its planning”.² So wrote Antoni Muntadas in his working notes while preparing his participation in the 51st Venice Biennale (2005). In the Spanish pavilion, the artist presented *On Translation: I Giardini*, the result of research into the history and topographical development of the Giardini, the national pavilions erected there and the proliferation of satellite pavilions in the city. In the central hall of this pavilion, there was a rectangular module that served as a database: one side contained photographs of the pavilions of the participating countries and information about their history, while the other included a list of the names of the countries excluded from that edition.

Through this installation, Muntadas transformed the pavilion into a complex metaphor for what he considers the Venice Biennale to be: a hierarchical structure that places the countries that have a pavilion in the Giardini in a privileged position, which they maintain, without needing to legitimise it, to the detriment of the others that, forced into renting buildings in the city, constantly need to revalidate their right to be there. This is because, as stressed in a conversation between the artist, Bartolomeu Marí and Mark Wigley, the national pavilion model imposed by the Biennale seems to affirm that those countries that do not have a pavilion are not countries, transforming architecture into both a way to participate in the event with dignity and a tool for legitimising national identity.³

At that edition, five Latin American pavilions participated. Inside the Giardini were Brazil, Venezuela, and Uruguay; outside, were Argentina and the Latin American pavilion. In 2007, Mexico became the third of these satellite pavilions.

1

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2

Antoni Muntadas, “Notes, November 2004”, in *Muntadas On Translation: I Giardini* (Madrid: Ministerio de Asuntos Exteriores y de Cooperación, 2005), 141. Unless otherwise indicated, translations are by the author.

3

“A Conversation Between Antoni Muntadas and Mark Wigley, New York” in *Muntadas On Translation: I Giardini*, 269–320.

The participation of Latin America has progressively increased to the extent that the last two editions of the Biennale (2019 and 2022) included ten and eleven countries respectively.⁴

The project presented by Muntadas in the Spanish pavilion was complemented by the catalogue, which includes historical research on the history of the Giardini, accompanied by an extensive visual documentation on its urban development.⁵ The catalogue thus became a tool for the study of the Giardini and the national pavilions, and its publication made it possible to update studies that were already outdated. Indeed, until then, the main bibliographical reference was *I Padiglioni della Biennale di Venezia* by Marco Mulazzani, published in 1988.⁶ Therefore, the importance of *On Translation: I Giardini* also lies in the weight it gives to the cross-history of the Giardini and the pavilions, a conjunction which, despite its significance, has not been comprehensively studied.

In this regard, it is worth noting, firstly, that in the case of countries without a permanent venue at the Giardini, art historians have approached what we can call the 'pavilion issue' more in terms of projects, artists or artworks than of the history of national architecture. In the case of Latin America, an example of this is the research concerning Argentina and Mexico, countries that, since 2013 and 2015 respectively, attained a venue at the Arsenale.⁷ In both cases, studies have reconstructed the exhibitions presented at the Biennale, analysing the changing aesthetic conditions of the local art scene and the influence of different political contexts on the criteria of national representation.⁸ Similarly, in the case of the Latin American Pavilion, which participated first in 1972 and then consistently from 1986 to 2015, what have been studied are the artistic projects but not the vicissitudes inherent to the pavilion.⁹

Secondly, the existing research on the background of the Giardini, which has the merit of having studied the origin and development of the pavilions, has been mainly interested in the tangible history of this space.¹⁰ However, the pla-

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In 2019, Argentina, Chile, Cuba, Guatemala, Mexico, Peru, and Haiti participated; in 2022, Haiti was absent, but Bolivia and the Dominican Republic joined in.

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Muntadas, "On Translation: I Giardini"; Maria Vittoria Martini, "A Brief History of I Giardini" and Francesca Comisso, "Selected Chronology", in *Muntadas On Translation: I Giardini*, 109-139, 206-223, and 235-267, respectively. The catalogue also contains a selected chronology that interweaves the history of the Biennale and its pavilions with that of the universal exhibitions and other biennials, as well as historical events.

6

This first edition was followed by other, expanded and revised ones (2004, 2011, 2014 and 2022), which nevertheless did not make any major changes to the original corpus. On national pavilions see also the recent research Clarissa Ricci, "From Obsolete to Contemporary: National Pavilions and the Venice Biennale", *Journal of Curatorial Studies* 9, no. 1 (2019): 8-39.

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The dates are indicative of the Visual Arts Biennial and not the Architecture one. In 2011 Argentina signed a lease for a space in the Arsenal for twenty-two years, while Mexico signed in 2013 for twenty years. Both countries are located in a large construction called *Sala d'Armi* (Weapons Rooms), consisting of two large two-storey buildings. On this, see Già Alajmo, "Kirchner come una popstar nella nuova 'casa' argentina", *Il Gazzettino*, Venice, June 4, 2011; Sonia Àvila, "México firma convenio por 20 años en la Bienal de Venecia", *Excelsior*, Mexico City, June 6, 2014.

8

Rodrigo Alonso, *Berni y las representaciones argentinas en la Bienal de Venecia* (Buenos Aires: Fundación Amalia Lacroze de Fortabat, 2013); Carlos Molina, "Fernando Gamboa y su particular versión de México", *Anales del Instituto de Investigaciones Estéticas*, no. 8 (2005): 117-143; Alejandra Ortiz Castañares, "Historia del pabellón mexicano en la Bienal de Venecia", in Erika Galicia Isasmendi, Fernando Quiles García, and Zara Ruiz Romero (eds.) *Acervo mexicano. Legado de culturas* (Seville: Hacer-VOS. Patrimonio Cultural Iberoamericano, 2017), 410-429; Carolina Nieto Ruiz, "Retelling the History of the Mexico Pavilion at La Biennale di Venezia", *Storie dell'arte contemporanea / Atlante delle Biennali*, vol. 4, no. 1 (2019): 377-397; Paola Natalia Pepa, "L'Argentina alla Biennale d'Arte di Venezia", *Storie dell'arte contemporanea / Atlante delle Biennali*, vol. 4, no. 1 (2019): 305-317.

9

Simone Zacchini, "Il Padiglione dell'Istituto Italo-Latino Americano alla Biennale. Storia di un progetto d'identità culturale", *Quaderni Culturali IILA*, no. 1 (2022): 85-99.

10

Martini, "A Brief History of I Giardini", 206-223; Federica Martini and Vittoria Martini, "I Giardini: Topografia di uno Spazio Espositivo", in *Venezia Venezia. 55ª Esposizione Internazionale d'arte La Biennale di Venezia, Padiglione del Cile* (Barcelona: Actar, 2013), 21 – 22; Gian Domenico Romanelli, "I Padiglioni stranieri della Biennale," *Annuario 1976. Eventi 1975* (Venice: La Biennale di Venezia, 1976), 838-864.

nimetrics of the Giardini show that, before the map became immutable, there were numerous countries that at one time had a pavilion and today do not. This scenario becomes more complex upon examining the Historical Archive of Contemporary Arts (ASAC), which provides access to planimetries that study the possible locations of pavilions that were never built. Consulting these planimetries prompted a questioning of what can be defined as the potential yet invisible history of the Giardini.

It is also worth acknowledging that recent research has shown how the history of biennials changes when viewed from a Southern perspective. In *Biennials, Triennials and documenta*, Anthony Gardner and Charles Green ask: “What might a Southern perspective of biennials look like?”¹¹ On the basis of this investigation, they have begun to rescue the biennials of the South, destabilising the canonical narrative, redefining the temporal arc of the so-called second wave of biennials and defining alternative turning points for rethinking the history of biennials.¹²

The question can be transferred to the pavilions of the Giardini, with a specific focus on Latin America, a region more often absent than present. In fact, of the twenty Latin American countries, only three have built their pavilions. Thus, taking up the statement by Antoni Muntadas who describes the Giardini as “a micro-city where history is reflected in the details of its planning”, and understanding that the current topography represents only a part of this history, it is worth considering what a Southern perspective on the pavilions would like.

This article investigates unrealised projects of Latin American national pavilions between 1948 and 1972, significant dates in the crossed history of the Venice Biennale and the participation of Latin America. On the one hand, 1948 was the year in which the exhibition reopened after the closure dictated by the Second World War and the year in which Latin American participation began to increase under the direction of Rodolfo Pallucchini (Secretary General of the Venice Biennale, 1948-1956).¹³ On the other hand, 1972 was the last edition before the reform of the Statute (1973) and the first to see the participation of the Italo-Latin American Institute, a space that welcomed Latin American nations that did not have their own pavilion.¹⁴

This research explores previously unexamined aspects of the Venice Biennale through archival research in Italy and Brazil. By studying unpublished documents from Historical Archive of Contemporary Arts, Wanda Svevo Historical Archive and Library of the Faculty of Architecture and Urbanism of the University of São Paulo, the article reconstructs the history of unrealised pavilions and shows how they are integrated into the dynamics of the structure of the Biennale. This demonstrates the need of Venice to manage the success of its own model.

The article opens with a brief *excursus* that explains the origin and development of this structure. The historical contextualisation is followed by four sections that draw a complex map interweaving the vicissitudes and decisions of both countries (Argentina and Mexico) and intergovernmental institutions (Car-

11

Anthony Gardner and Charles Green, *Biennials, Triennials and documenta: The Exhibitions that Created Contemporary Art* (Hoboken: Wiley Blackwell, 2016), 83.

12

See also Anthony Gardner and Charles Charles, “South as Method? Biennials Past and Present”, in *Making Biennials in Contemporary Times. Essays from the World Biennial Forum n° 2* (São Paulo: Biennial Foundation, Fundação Bienal de São Paulo and ICCo Instituto de Cultura Contemporânea, 2014), 37-46.

13

Until this date, Argentina was the only country that had participated in the Biennale. In 1948, there were no participations from Latin America despite invitations extended by the Biennial. Under the direction of Pallucchini, Brazil, Colombia, and Mexico participated for the first time in 1950, Bolivia and Cuba in 1952 and Venezuela and Uruguay in 1954. On the direction of Pallucchini see Maria Cristina Bandera, “Pallucchini protagonista della Biennale” and Lia Durante, “Le mostre all'estero delle Biennali di Rodolfo Pallucchini (1947-1957)”, *Saggi e memorie di storia dell'arte*, vol. 35 (2011): 75-92 and 93-116, respectively.

14

For an analysis of two turning points in the history of the Biennale, such as 1948 and 1973, see Stefano Collicelli Gagal and Vittoria Martini, “The Venice Biennale at its Turning Point”, in Noemi del Haro García, Patricia Mayayo, Jesus Carrillo (eds.), *Making Art History in Europe After 1945* (New York: Routledge, 2020), 83–100. See also Laura Moure Cecchini, “The Padiglione dell'America Latina: A Fascist Project of Cultural Diplomacy at the Venice Biennale, 1929-1932”, *OBOE Journal* 5, no. 1 (2024): 4-12.

tagena Agreement countries) that did not manage to build a permanent venue in the Giardini, and those countries (Brazil, Venezuela, and Uruguay) that did attain a national pavilion.

National Pavilions: A Brief History

The national pavilions were a logistical measure that led to the international consolidation of the Venice Biennale. Born on paper as *Esposizione biennale artistica nazionale* (National Biennale Art Exhibition) in 1893, the Biennale opened its doors as *Prima Esposizione Internazionale d'Arte della Città di Venezia* (First International Art Exhibition of the City of Venice) in 1895. Behind the change was the idea of the advisory committee to reserve a section for foreign artists and the survey conducted by Riccardo Selvatico (Mayor of Venice and President of the Venice Biennale, 1895) which checked its feasibility. The feedback was encouraging and it was decided to organise an international art exhibition.¹⁵

Nevertheless, the international character of the exhibition soon provoked criticism from Italian artists who felt that they did not have enough space in the Palazzo dell'Esposizione (henceforth: Central Pavilion).¹⁶ The turning point came when, in 1907, Antonio Fradeletto (General Secretary of the Venice Biennale, 1895-1914) managed to find a solution to this dilemma, proposing to place the artworks of foreign artists in national pavilions to be built in the Giardini. Countries were required to submit a project to the municipality of Venice, the institution responsible for both its approval and the transfer of the land. Once built (or purchased), the country officially owned the pavilion, and had to assume all expenses for its conservation and refurbishment. This strategy allowed the Biennale not only to have more space for Italian artists in the Palazzo dell'Esposizione but also to guarantee constant international participation, externalising costs.

The first two settlement areas were established on the two Cartesian axes that structure the Giardini: the one from the city to the *Motta di Sant'Antonio* (Montagnola), known as *Viale alla Motta*, and the one from the lagoon to the Central Pavilion, called *Viale dei Tigli*.¹⁷ In fact, the first national pavilions were either built on the left side of the *Viale dei Tigli* (Belgium, 1907; Netherlands, 1914 [1912]; Spain, 1922) or on the *Montagnola* (Great Britain, 1909; Germany, 1909; France, 1912; Russia, 1914).¹⁸

The increasing number of requests by countries meant that the Giardini began to become overcrowded in the early 1930s. To solve this problem, the area of Saint Helena Island was annexed in 1932. In the same year, the architectural complex of Brenno Del Giudice, consisting of a central hemicycle and a pavilion on either side, was constructed. In 1934, Greece and Austria joined and in 1938, the Del Giudice's complex was extended with another pavilion on each side.¹⁹

15

Romolo Bazzoni, *60 anni della Biennale di Venezia* (Venice: Lombroso Editore, 1926), 13-33. The advisory committee was composed of Bartolomeo Bezzani, Enrico Castelnuovo, Antonio Dal Zotto, Marius De Maria, Antonio Fradeletto, Pietro Fragiaco, Michelangelo Guggenheim, Cesare Laurenti, Marco Levi, Emilio Marsili, Giuseppe Minio, Nicolò Papadopoli, Augusto Sèzanne, and Giovanni Stucky. Selvatico's survey was carried out among the "most eminent artists of the time", who later became part of the sponsoring committee of the 1st Biennale.

16

Palazzo dell'Esposizione was the denomination given to the building in the first editions. Over the Biennale's history, it has changed its name and function several times (e.g., *Palazzo dell'Esposizione* – *Padiglione Centrale* – *Padiglione Italia*). In the documentation consulted, it appears mostly as the Central Pavilion; this nomenclature will be adopted throughout.

17

The *Motta di Sant'Antonio* corresponds to a mound probably raised with the rubble of the buildings demolished for the realisation of the Giardini. In many of the documents consulted, it appears as *Montagnola*, which means 'mound' in Italian.

18

The Netherlands Pavilion (used by this country since 1914) was built by the Biennale in 1912.

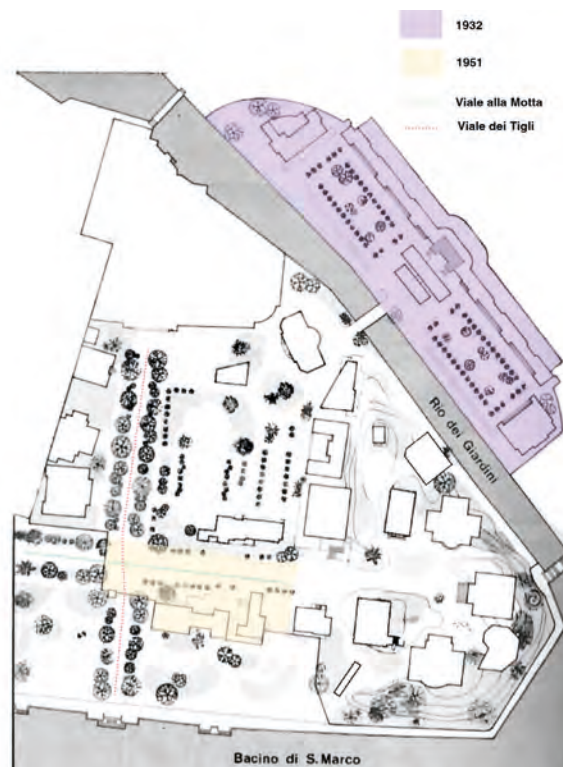
19

This architectural complex hosted several national delegations. Currently, on the left of the central hemicycle are Serbia and Egypt and on the right are Poland and Romania. The central hemicycle is the Venice Pavilion. On the enlargement of the 1930s and Del Giudice's project see Marco Mulazzani, *I Padiglioni della Biennale di Venezia* (Milan: Electa, 2011), 73-85.

In the 1950s, the problem of spatial saturation was intensified due to the wave of post-war requests and the 1957 panoramic constraint. The latter prohibited the felling of trees, thus limiting the possibilities of finding new buildable areas. Consequently, the Biennale launched a series of measures to try to address the situation. Firstly, in 1951, a second enlargement was carried out [Fig. 1], then the street leading to the *Motta di Sant'Antonio* was annexed, shifting the Biennale's boundary from the Russian to the Swiss pavilion (1952). Furthermore, smaller plots of land began to be allocated. Secondly, a reorganisation project for the Giardini was launched, which sought both to restructure the Central Pavilion and to provide space for future national pavilions. Between 1958 and 1968, there were three projects that, although approved by the municipality, never got off the drawing-board.²⁰ Thanks to this project of reorganisation many nations hoped to gain a permanent venue at the Giardini during the period. Nonetheless, over the course of this decade, only a few countries inaugurated their pavilions, namely Canada (1958), Uruguay (1961), Nordic Countries (1962), and Brazil (1964).²¹

After the 1960s, only Australia (1988) and South Korea (1995) gained entrance to the Giardini. Two years before the opening of the Australian pavilion, countries without a pavilion (including Australia) had been hosted at the Arsenale, a space that would progressively be incorporated into the Biennale throughout the 1980s, becoming its second venue.²² The 1980s should also be remembered for the designation of the Giardini as a no-build zone (1988) and, a decade later, in 1998, many pavilions were declared to be of historical and artistic interest, making any

fig. 1
Illustrative reconstruction of the two enlargements of the Giardini of the Venice Biennale. Reconstruction by the author, 2022.



20

The three projects were by the Passarelli & Co. group (1958), Carlo Scarpa (1962-1963) and Luis Kahn (1968). For a detailed description see Gian Domenico Romanelli, "Le sedi della Biennale. Il Padiglione "Italia" ai Giardini di Castello (già Palazzo dell'Esposizione)", in *Annuario 1975. Eventi 1974* (Venice: La Biennale di Venezia, 1975), 645-655.

21

The Nordic Countries Pavilion houses Sweden, Norway, and Finland.

22

In 1986, the countries present at the Arsenale were Argentina, Australia, Cyprus, Colombia, Cuba, Italy, Mexico, Peru, Portugal, German Democratic Republic, South Korea, San Marino, and the Italo-Latin American Institute. It is important to note that, with the gradual incorporation of the Arsenale, the Biennale gained a second venue to house national pavilions. However, these accommodations are concessions of pre-existing architectural spaces for a fixed period, subject to prior agreement with the Biennale.

change definitively impossible.²³ Three years earlier, in 1995, the Biennale offered countries without a pavilion the opportunity to make use of building outside of the Giardini, an initiative that resulted in the phenomenon of satellite pavilions.

Brazil

“The Museum of Modern Art of São Paulo always longed to see one of its long-held aspirations fulfilled: that of organising the participation of some of the most significant painters of Brazilian modern art in the Biennale”.²⁴ Thus opened the letter that Francisco Matarazzo sent to Giovanni Ponti in December 1949 to endorse the Brazilian participation at the 25th Venice Biennale (1950). Ponti (Extraordinary Commissioner of the Venice Biennale, 1948-1952) expressed his gratitude to Matarazzo not only for his willingness to take charge of organising the Brazilian exhibition, but also for the offer to institute the Museum of Modern Art São Paulo Brazil award, which would contribute towards increasing the prestige of the Biennale.²⁵ He also indicated that, in order to have an official status, the participation had to have the approval of the Brazilian government.²⁶

Indeed, the “old aspiration” to which Matarazzo referred corresponded to his first attempt at organising the Brazilian participation in the 1948 Biennale. On that occasion, both the possibility of sending an official national delegation and the option of participating within a room called *Centro d'Arte Moderna del Brasile* (Modern Art Centre of Brazil) was offered.²⁷ The option they chose was the first, yet the room reserved for the country remained empty. With the exhibition already opened and the catalogue printed, Pedro de Moraes Barros (Ambassador of Brazil in Rome) informed the Biennale that they had been unable to send the artworks in time.²⁸

In 1950, in order to avoid the same *impasse*, Pallucchini contacted the diplomats referring to what had happened in 1948 and indicating the Biennale's keen interest in the terms of collaboration offered by Matarazzo. He also requested an agreement with the Brazilian authorities so that the exhibition could have an official endorsed national character.²⁹ Located in a room within the Central Pavilion,

23

Martini and Martini, “I Giardini: Topografia di uno Spazio Espositivo”, 21 - 22.

24

Letter from Francisco Matarazzo Sobrinho to Giovanni Ponti, São Paulo, December 5, 1949 (ASAC, FS, SP, b.05).

25

The Museum of Modern Art of São Paulo was created by the initiative of industrialist and patron Francisco Matarazzo, who was its president until 1963. The prize offered was 500,000 Italian lire and was open to artists of any nationality. In 1950 it was given to the Mexican David Alfaro Siqueiros.

26

Furthermore, national governments had to have received a prior invitation from the Biennale. The Brazilian government was officially invited on January 22, 1948. See “Regolamento”, in 25. *Esposizione Biennale Internazionale d'Arte* (Venice: Alfieri, 1950), 1 - 11; Letter from Giovanni Ponti to Francisco Matarazzo Sobrinho, Venice, January 7, 1950; Letter from Giovanni Ponti to the Ambassador of Brazil in Italy, Venice, January 22, 1948 (ASAC, FS, SP, b.05).

27

The ASAC preserves Pallucchini's response to Matarazzo but not Matarazzo's previous letter (about the participation in 1948). Other correspondence in the archive shows that the communication took place in 1947. See Letter from Rodolfo Pallucchini to Pasquale Fiocca, Venice, December 1, 1947; Letter from Rodolfo Pallucchini to Francisco Matarazzo Sobrinho, Venice, January 8, 1950 (ASAC, FS, SP, b.05). The *Centro d'Arte Moderna* was the Museum of Modern Art of São Paulo, inaugurated in 1948.

28

On the communication of non-participation of Brazil and the response of the Biennale (its proposal to inaugurate the Brazilian exhibition at a later date) see the Telegram from Pedro de Moraes Barros to Rodolfo Pallucchini, June 15, 1948; Letter from Rodolfo Pallucchini to Pedro Moraes Barros, Venice, June 17, 1948 (ASAC, FS, SP, b.05); For an analysis of the country's non-participation and the Brazilian political and cultural context see “1948: un'occasione mancata” in Dunia Roquetti Saroute, “La partecipazione brasiliana all'Esposizione internazionale d'arte di Venezia (1950-1964)” (PhD diss., Università Ca' Foscari Venezia, 2019), 20-33.

29

Letter from Rodolfo Pallucchini to Mario Augusto Martini (Ambassador of Italy in Rio de Janeiro), Venice, February 23, 1950 (ASAC, FS, SP, b.05).

Brazil's inaugural participation was thus curated by the Museum of Modern Art of São Paulo (MAM). The exhibition had been set up by Paolo Matarazzo and curated by José Simeão Leal (Director of the Documentation Service of the Ministry of Education).³⁰ Meanwhile, Francisco Matarazzo was organising the Bienal de São Paulo, whose first edition took place in 1951.³¹

The Museum of Modern Art (MAM), which was responsible for organising the Bienal de São Paulo, also oversaw the Brazil's participation in the Venice Biennale until 1964, fostering a closely intertwined relationship between the two biennials.³² In this inter-institutional relationship, Francisco Matarazzo played a crucial role as an interlocutor and served as the pavilion's curator on several occasions.³³ One such instance occurred in 1952 when he expressed his desire to promote national architecture.³⁴ The correspondence between the Biennale and Brazilian diplomatic institutions shows that the initial idea was to have a national pavilion in the 1954 edition, but it was not carried out.³⁵

The first real indication of what terrain was available dated back to 1958 and corresponded to the area behind the pavilions of the United States and Czechoslovakia. This proposal came in January from Gian Alberto Dell'Acqua (General Secretary of the Venice Biennale, 1958-1968), who indicated that the total area measured 191 square metres, corresponding to the brown part of the map [Fig. 2]. Due to the characteristics of the space (its being partly in pendency) and the heritage value (containing trees that could not be felled), the green area could not be encroached upon. Instead, Dell'Acqua granted the opportunity to occupy a plain area (in yellow) to obtain an overall surface of 254 square metres. He also explained that this area had initially been allocated to India but, since their project had not been fulfilled, he considered that the municipality of Venice would allow the subrogation.³⁶ Indeed, the resolution came to pass in February of that year, with prior approval of the architectural project reserved.³⁷

However, the official communication from Brazil approving the construction of the pavilion did not arrive until more than a year later. In July 1959, Francisco Matarazzo wrote to the Ambassador in Rome that "the Museum had received the agreement from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs regarding the construction

30

The Biennale documentation of the period under consideration uses the Italian term of *commissario*, which in this article is translated as curator.

31

In the Brazil section of the Venice Biennale catalogue, the art critic Sérgio Milliet announced that the MAM was organising a biennial "on the model of the Venice Biennale". See Sérgio Milliet, "Brasile", in 25. *Esposizione Biennale internazionale d'arte* (Venice: Alfieri, 1950), 221 – 222.

32

The MAM organised the Brazilian participation in Venice until 1960 and the Bienal de São Paulo until 1961. From 1962 to 1964, the MAM and the Fundação Bienal de São Paulo (FBSP, founded in 1961) collaborated in the organisation of the Bienal de São Paulo. The FBSP has been responsible for the organisation of the Brazilian Pavilion at the Venice Biennale since 1966, with the exception of the period between 1970 and 1995 (in charge of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs) and 2009 (in charge of the Fundação Nacional da Artes -FUNARTE).

33

Matarazzo was the curator of the Brazilian Pavilion in 1952 and 1954 and from 1962 to 1968. The documentation preserved at ASAC reveals that he was one of the interlocutors arguing for the construction of the pavilion. For example, in 1964 Matarazzo went to Italy with Mario Dias Costa (Head of the Office of Cultural Promotion at the Ministry of Foreign) to discuss this issue. See Communication to Gian Alberto Dell'Acqua, Rome, March 9, 1964 (ASAC, FS, AV, b.123).

34

Letter from Giovanni Ponti to Francisco Matarazzo Sobrinho, Venice, July 13, 1953 (ASAC, FS, SP, b.05).

35

Letter from Giovanni Ponti to Carlos Alves de Souza (Ambassador of Brazil in Rome), Venice, January 14, 1954 (ASAC, FS, SP, b.05). Since Brazil could not build the pavilion for 1954, the Biennale reserved a space in the Central Pavilion "also to return the cordial hospitality of the Second Bienal de São Paulo to the official Italian section".

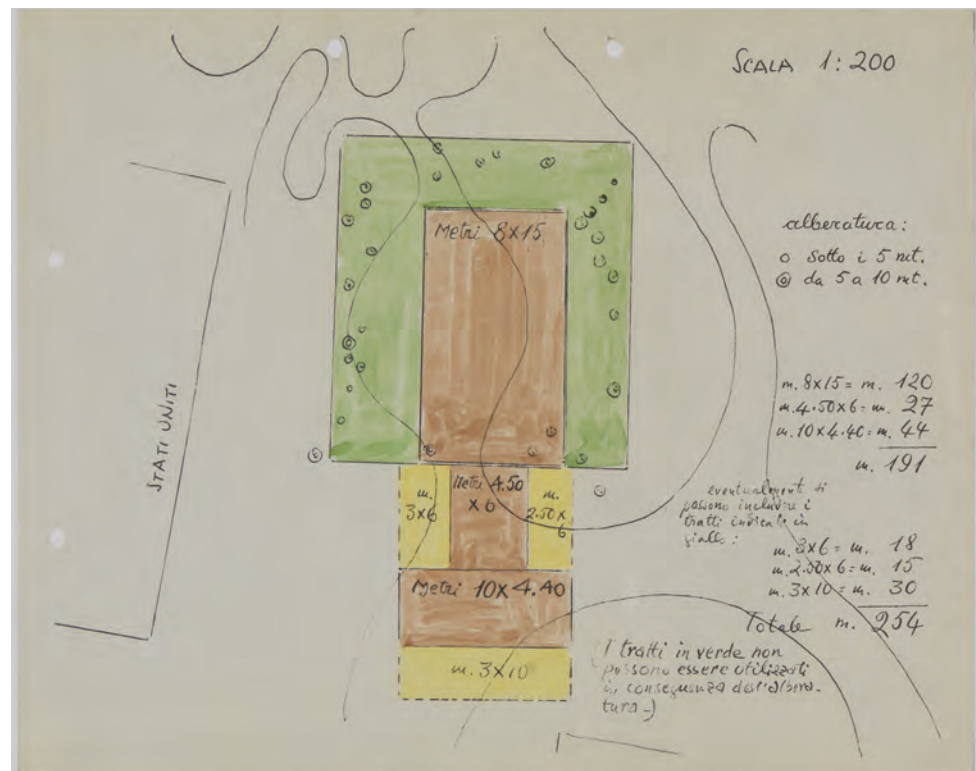
36

Letter from Gian Alberto Dell'Acqua to Renato Pacileo, January 16, 1958 (ASAC, FS, SP, b.05). The lawyer Renato Pacileo was one of the interlocutors between the Venice Biennale and the Brazilian representation. As regards the Indian pavilion, this was not built for economic reasons.

37

Communication from the municipality of Venice to Ente Autonomo La Biennale di Venezia, Venice, February 19, 1958 (ASAC, FS, AV, b.123).

fig. 2
Planimetry of the area offered by the Venice Biennale behind the pavilions of the United States and Czechoslovakia in 1958, Acervo de Biblioteca da FAUUSP.



of the Brazilian pavilion at the Venice Biennale”.³⁸ Brazil requested a site that would “easily allow a large number of visitors” and informed the Biennale that architect Henrique Mindlin would visit the Giardini to inspect possible locations.³⁹ Dell’Acqua reported that the available areas were the same as in 1958, with the aggravating factor that a small pavilion had been built near the United States and Czechoslovakia pavilions, for which there were ongoing sales negotiations with one country.⁴⁰ That country was Uruguay, which acquired it in 1960.⁴¹

In December 1959, the pavilion-bridge project by architects Henrique E. Mindlin, Giancarlo Palanti and Walmyr L. Amaral was ready. The document details that the choice of the site was due to the lack of other available space in the Giardini and the wish not to affect existing trees and gardens. The desired location was “the one located in the area behind the Hungary and Israel pavilions, where there is a small bridge, over the Giardini’s Canal [Rio dei Giardini]”.⁴² Aware of the peculiarity of the location, the architects emphasised that the architecture would be sober, integrating discreetly and harmoniously into the existing group of multifaceted buildings. Furthermore, the pavilion would increase the height of the existing bridge allowing on the one side, a wide and improved view of the Church of San Pietro di Castello and, on the other, a perspective of the Lagoon.⁴³

³⁸

Letter from Francisco Matarazzo Sobrinho to Adolpho Cardoso de Alencastro Guimarães (Ambassador of Brazil in Rome), São Paulo, July 13, 1959 (AHWS, 01-01120).

³⁹

The communication of the construction of the Pavilion reached the Venice Biennale through an exchange between the Italian Embassy in Rio de Janeiro and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. See “Comunicazione Ministero Affari Esteri. Oggetto: XXXV Biennale d’Arte di Venezia – partecipazione del Brasile”, Rome, July 4, 1959 (ASAC, FS, AV, b.123).

⁴⁰

Letter from Gian Alberto Dell’Acqua to Arturo Porfili (General Secretary of the Bienal de São Paulo, 1953-1959), Venice, July 13, 1959 (AB FAUUSP).

⁴¹

In 1958, this pavilion accommodated Tunisia, Turkey and Malta.

⁴²

“Il Padiglione del Brasile nella Biennale di Venezia. Progetto [1] degli architetti Henrique E. Mindlin, Giancarlo Palanti y Walmyr L. Amaral” (ASAC, FS, SP, b.05). On the project, see also “O Brasil construirá pavilhão próprio na Bienal de Veneza”, *Estado do São Paulo*, São Paulo, July 8, 1959 (AHWS, 27-00017).

⁴³

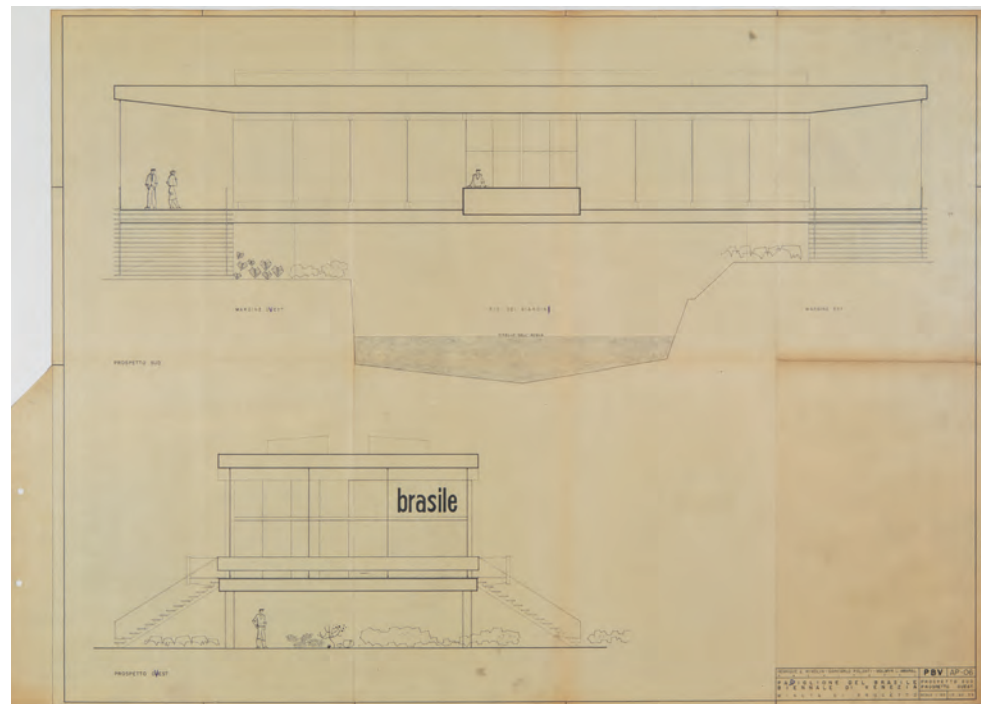
The height of the pavilion would increase from 3.5 to 5 meters above the water level.

The rectangular volume of the exhibition hall was twenty-five metres long, ten metres wide and four and a half metres high, flanked by large windows and with a balcony on each side. The floor and roof extended for five metres at each edge of the canal, allowing access via two stairways on both sides of the building and canal [Fig. 3]. The document also pointed out that it was a prefabricated metal structure that could easily be transported elsewhere in the event of a re-organisation of the Giardini' site.⁴⁴

This project generated an extensive discussion between the Biennale and the Brazilian architects, mainly because of the existing bridge. First of all, the water and gas pipes that supplied Saint Helena's Island passed under the bridge. Secondly, the bridge was not only used for public transit, but also as a loading and unloading point (with a weight-bearing capacity of thirty quintals) during the Biennale set-up. The first pavilion-bridge project envisaged moving the existing bridge to the area behind the Central Pavilion; however, due to its functional importance, the Biennale proposed not modifying its position and rather moving the pavilion-bridge to the right.⁴⁵

In response to this proposal, the Brazilian architects pointed out that such a displacement would relegate the pavilion to a rather hidden area, create an aesthetic interference between the pavilion-bridge and the existing bridge, and limit the view of the Church of San Pietro di Castello.⁴⁶ They proposed to integrating the pavilion bridge with the existing bridge by constructing a ramp bridge accessible to truck.⁴⁷ [Fig. 4] This design would align the axis of the bridge would continue to coincide with the axis of the Venice pavilion, maintaining the symmetrical visual

fig. 3
Henrique E. Mindlin, Giancarlo Palanti and Walmyr L. Amaral,
Project for Brazil Pavilion
(South Façade and West
Façade) for the XXX Venice
Biennale, 1959, Acervo de
Biblioteca da FAUUSP.



44

As previously explained, by that time there was a project to build the New Central Pavilion which would have modified the topography of the Giardini.

45

Letter from Deuglesse Grassi (Deputy Administrative Director of the Venice Biennale, 1960) to Giancarlo Palatini, Venice, March 15, 1960 (AB FAUUSP).

46

Letter from Giancarlo Palatini to Deuglesse Grassi, São Paulo, March 24, 1960 (AB FAUUSP).

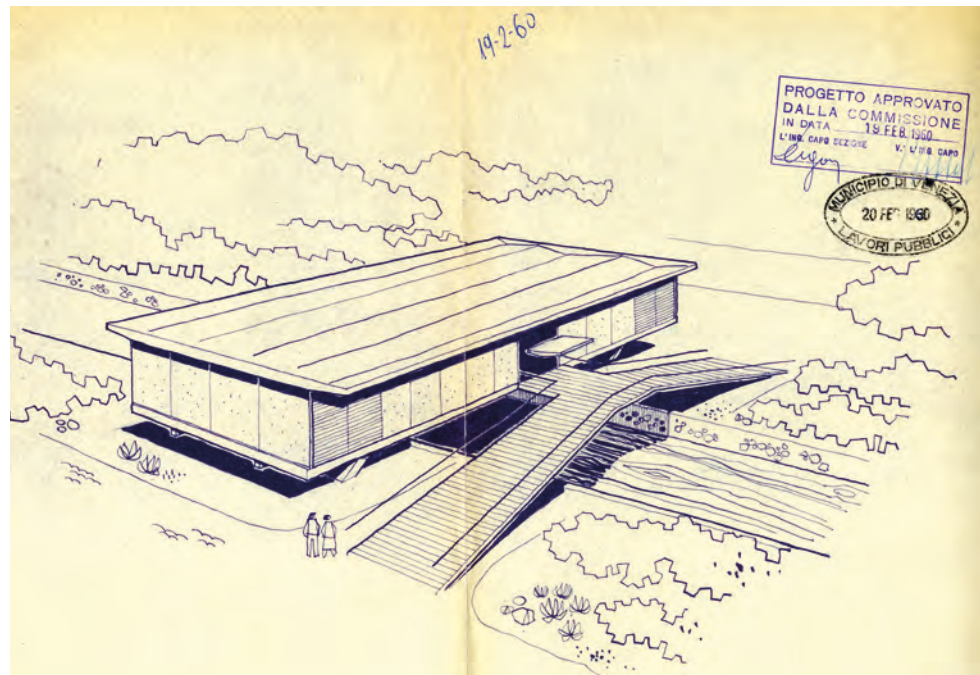
47

"Il Padiglione del Brasile nella Biennale di Venezia. Progetto [2] degli architetti Henrique E. Mindlin, Giancarlo Palanti e Walmyr L. Amaral" (AB FAUUSP). In this document the architects mention another solution, indicated as "C", which was briefly described. It consisted of "making two bridges on both sides of the pavilion, making the pattern of the two facades the same".

connection with the Del Giudice's complex and ensuring the necessary height for the view of the church, while preserving the load-bearing capacity of the existing bridge.⁴⁸

The project was finally approved, and the Brazilian pavilion was scheduled to open at the 1960 Biennale.⁴⁹ The prefabricated structure was supposed to be shipped from Brazil to Italy for assembly at the Giardini. Due to delays from the Brazilian National Steel Company, the pavilion's construction was postponed first to 1962 and then to 1964.⁵⁰ Finally, in 1964, a different pavilion was built in another location, no longer straddling the canal but situated along the axis joining the bridge over the canal to Del Giudice's complex.⁵¹ The new project was conceived by the Venetian architect Amerigo Marchesin and it was composed of two volumes intersected by a covered gallery, which directs the gaze towards the pavilions behind. The current pavilion opened in 1964 "not fully completed but, at least, in a condition to be able to showcase [...] the artworks of our [Brazilian artist] participants".⁵²

fig. 4
Henrique E. Mindlin, Giancarlo Palanti and Walmyr L. Amaral,
Project for Brazil Pavilion
approved on February 19, 1960,
Archivio Storico della Biennale
di Venezia - ASAC.



48

Letter from Giancarlo Palanti to Deuglesse Grassi, São Paulo, March 24, 1960 (AB FAUUSP). Load capacity was increased to 5 tonnes.

49

Telegram from Giancarlo Palanti to Henrique E. Mindlin, Venice, February 20, 1960 (AB FAUUSP); "Concessione terreno nel recinto della Biennale per la costruzione del padiglione per l'arte brasiliana. Comune di Venezia. Ufficio Patrimonio", Venice, May 6, 1960 (ASAC, FS, AV, b.123).

50

Letter from Valeriano Pastor to Giancarlo Palanti, Venice, March 15, 1960; Letter from Giancarlo Palanti to Valeriano Pastor, March 22, 1960; Letter from Giancarlo Palanti to Deuglesse Grassi, São Paulo, March, 24 1960; Letter from Deuglesse Grassi to Giancarlo Palanti, Venice, April 7, 1960 (AB FAUUSP). Letter from Sérgio Corrêa da Costa (*Charge d'affaires* of Brazil in Rome) to Gian Alberto Dell'Acqua, Rome, April 26, 1962 (ASAC, FS, AV, b.123). Despite not being able to build the pavilion for the 1960 edition, the idea was to send the material as soon as possible. Indeed, architect Palanti asked if it would be possible to start work during the opening months of the Biennale. Grassi replied that construction should be postponed until after the Biennale was over.

51

The only information I found about the abrogation of the bridge-pavilion project was in the correspondence of Giancarlo Palanti. In a confidential letter, the architect reported that the decision was due to "internal political reasons of the Biennale". See Letter from Palanti to Michelina Michelotti Pastor, São Paulo, May 26, 1964 (AB FAUUSP). The architect Michelina Michelotti Pastor was the wife of the architect Valeriano Pastor.

52

Letter from Landulpho A. Borges da Fonseca (Consul of Brazil in Milan) to Gian Alberto Dell'Acqua, Milan, April 20, 1964 (ASAC, FS, AV, b.123).

Mexico

In 1950, Mexico participated for the first time in the Biennale. It did not have its own pavilion but was hosted on the far right of the architectural complex of Saint Helena Island, a position currently occupied by Romania. In the following edition (1952), it again occupied this pavilion, sharing the space with Guatemala. The debut of Mexico in Venice was curated by Fernando Gamboa (Deputy Director of the National Institute of Fine Arts - INBA, 1947-1952), with artworks by muralists Diego Rivera, José Clemente Orozco, David Alfaro Siqueiros, and Rufino Tamayo.⁵³

The success of the exhibition was so great that in July, not even a month after the inauguration, Gamboa received two letters in which the Biennale proposed the construction of the national pavilion. The first one, penned by Giovanni Ponti, lauded the exhibition and wished that “as a result of such a flattering premise, Mexico too would like to be present with its own pavilion in the next edition”.⁵⁴ In the second, Rodolfo Pallucchini reiterated the congratulations and the wish that the Mexican government would want to support the construction of the pavilion so that it could be a permanent exhibition venue for studying and promoting Mexican art.⁵⁵

From July 1950 to December 1951, a dense correspondence developed concerning the erection of Mexico’s national architecture. While Gamboa was insisting on the importance of building the pavilion with Mexican authorities, possible sites for its location were being discussed. In fact, during the second enlargement of the Giardini, the annexed area of *Viale alla Motta*, to the right of the new entrance, had been assigned to it. However, the silence of the Mexican government, and the high number of requests received, finally led the Biennale to decide to cede this space to Switzerland.⁵⁶

Pallucchini reported this decision to Gamboa in October 1951. Nevertheless, after recalling the different occasions (March and May) and ways (by letter and in person) in which this space was offered to Mexico and a response requested, he indicated that the Venetian institution could reserve another space in the area. The proposal corresponded to the parcel of land between the new Swiss pavilion and the Russian one [Fig. 5]. In this way, the country would enjoy a privileged position, maintaining its proximity to the main entrance. It was also located close to the street that led to the Central Pavilion on one side and to the *Montagnola* pavilions (France, the United Kingdom and Germany) on the other.⁵⁷

The final refusal came in December of the same year. It was for economic reasons, since the Mexican government had decided to invest “the whole budget for Fine Arts activities abroad” in the *Art mexicain du précolombien à nos jours* exhibition (Mexican Art from pre-Columbian times to the present day) to be held at the Musée National d’Art Moderne of Paris in 1952.⁵⁸ On this occasion, Gamboa expressed his regret about the decision, predicting that the resonance of this exhibition “will raise the interest of our Government in making Mexican art known in

53

On this first Mexican participation see Fernando Gamboa, “Messico”, in 25. *Esposizione Biennale internazionale d’arte* (Venice: Alfieri, 1950), 350 – 359.

54

Letter from Giovanni Ponti to Fernando Gamboa, Venice, July 3, 1950 (ASAC, FS, SP, b.40).

55

Letter from Rodolfo Pallucchini to Fernando Gamboa, Venice, July 6, 1950 (ASAC, FS, SP, b.40).

56

From 1932 to 1950, Switzerland had its pavilion in the Del Giudice’s complex, occupying the first pavilion to the left of the central hemicycle. In July 1951, the country agreed the new position with the Biennale and ceded its previous space to Egypt. The new Swiss pavilion was inaugurated in 1952. See Mulazzani, *I Padiglioni della Biennale di Venezia*, 91-93.

57

Letters from Fernando Gamboa to Rodolfo Pallucchini, Mexico City, July 27, 1950 and February 24, 1950; Letter from Rodolfo Pallucchini to Fernando Gamboa, Venice, October 25, 1951 (ASAC, FS, SP, b.40).

58

On this exhibition and the cultural policy of Mexican art exhibitions, see Adriana Ortega Orozco, “México-Francia: una larga historia de exposiciones como herramientas diplomáticas”, *Ideas. Ideas d’Amériques*, no. 8 (2016 –2017), doi: 10.4000/ideas.1729, accessed April 2022.

Europe even higher, and, consequently, the next government will be interested in providing the funds necessary to realise both the wishes of the Biennale as well as yours and mine to build the Mexican pavilion in Venice”.⁵⁹

At the 26th Venice Biennale (1952), Mexico was hosted in the same pavilion as previously, presenting a large collection of engravings instead of the great Mexican muralists, which were held back in the French exhibition.⁶⁰ Despite the success of the Paris exhibition, the pavilion did not materialise at the Giardini. In September of the following year, architect Carlo Scarpa was commissioned to conceive the Venezuelan pavilion, the construction of which began in 1954. Consequently, the Venezuelan pavilion opened its doors between those of Switzerland and Russia, taking advantage of the space left vacant by Mexico.⁶¹

fig. 5
Areas offered to Mexico by
the Biennale, 1950 - 1951.
Reconstruction by the author,
2022.



Argentina

In July 1949, the Direction of the Biennale received a letter from Francisco Armellini (Secretary of the National Academy of Fine Arts of Buenos Aires, 1949-1960), who, in 1922, had curated the third (and, for the time-being, the last) Argentine participation.⁶² Armellini expressed the will to ensure the participation of this country in the 25th edition (1950) and to resume formalities for the construction of the pavilion. He cited it as “the supreme ideal”, referring to a previous unfinished project.⁶³ Hence, this letter opens a window into the 1920s while inaugurating two decades of requests concerning the construction of national architecture.

⁵⁹

Letter from Fernando Gamboa to Rodolfo Pallucchini, Mexico City, December 6, 1951 (ASAC, FS, SP, b.40).

⁶⁰

Venice received the exhibition of engravings because the paintings of the four great Mexican muralists were being exhibited in Paris.

⁶¹

The pavilion was inaugurated in a “provisional state” in October 1954 (the Biennale had begun in June) and finally finished by June 1956. See Mulazzani, *I Padiglioni della Biennale di Venezia*, 94-95.

⁶²

The National Academy of Fine Arts (ANBA) was created by presidential decree on July 1, 1936. Between 1944 and 1963 Martin Noel was the President.

⁶³

Letter from Francisco Armellini to Romolo Bazzoni, Varagnolo and Zorzi, Buenos Aires, June 11, 1949; Letter from Romolo Bazzoni to Francisco Armellini, September 21, 1949 (ASAC, FS, SP, b.01). Romolo Bazzoni was the Administrative Director of the Biennale in 1922. In 1950, he occupied the position of Advisor and informed Armellini that Rodolfo Pallucchini was the current Secretary General. It has not been possible to identify the other two recipients.

The project to which Armellini referred not only saw him involved as interlocutor between the Argentine government authorities and the Biennale, but also reached the Argentine press.⁶⁴ On November 13, 1923, *La Prensa* published an article about the upcoming construction of the Argentinian pavilion, showing its exact location on a map between those of France and Hungary [Fig. 6]. The article enthused that in 1924 “the Argentine Republic will be the first American nation to have an exclusive pavilion, alongside those of Great Britain, France, Spain, Germany, Hungary, Belgium, Netherlands and Russia”.⁶⁵

Furthermore, after highlighting the advantages of the space (such as its easy accessibility, proximity to the jetty, and location behind the restaurant), the article discusses the terms of the agreement, which involved the transfer of the land for a number of years, renewable upon expiration. It also mentions the assigned amount of 60,000 Argentine pesos and emphasises the symbolic cost of the lease contract, which was ten Italian lire per year, equivalent to one and a half Argentine pesos.

fig. 6
Photo of the article (detail)
“Pabellón argentino en
Venecia. Su próxima erección”,
La Prensa, Buenos Aires,
November 13, 1923.



64

The role performed by Armellini is highlighted in the correspondence between Martin Noel (then President of the National Commission of Fine Arts of Argentina, 1920-1930) and Davide Giordano (Mayor of Venice, 1922 - 1924). Communications on the construction of the pavilion were also maintained with Giovanni Bordiga (President of the Venice Biennale, 1920 - 1926). Letter from Martin Noel to Davide Giordano, Buenos Aires, July 13, 1923; Telegram of Martin Noel to Giovanni Bordiga, August 26, 1923 (ASAC, FS, SN PAD, b.15).

65

“Pabellón argentino en Venecia. Su próxima erección”, *La Prensa*, Buenos Aires, November 13, 1923. The article also praised Argentina's participation in 1922, stating that it was the “only country in the continent whose artists (...) had their own room”. Indeed, the United States, whose participation had been constant since 1895, did not participate.

Despite the level of detail of the article, which suggests an almost imminent onset of the works, the project did not reach its goal. On November 29, 1923, a few days after its publication, Martin Noel (President of the National Commission of Fine Arts of Argentina, 1920-1930) wrote to Giovanni Bordiga (President of the Venice Biennale, 1920-1926) requesting an extension for the construction of the pavilion until 1926. Stating “internal political reasons”, the missive explained that the National Congress had held a reduced number of sessions during the year, closing the parliamentary period without dealing with matters of “singular importance” such as the construction of the pavilion.⁶⁶ Meanwhile, Noel ensured that the National Congress would approve the required amount in the new parliamentary period.

The Biennale confirmed the cession of the land until 1926, and in Venice, on July 22, 1925, Fernando Pérez (Ambassador of Argentina in Rome) signed a convention for the construction of the Argentina Pavilion.⁶⁷ Despite the agreement, the pavilion was neither built in the autumn of that year (as was stipulated for inauguration in the 15th edition) nor in the ensuing years.

In 1929, the Biennale informed Fernando Pérez that the municipality of Venice could not “keep a convention in force indefinitely that should have had an immediate effect”, underlining that the Biennale had not received any news since its stipulation. Furthermore, a new regulatory plan had been approved for the Giardini, “for which old buildings are being demolished and new ones are being erected, including the pavilion of the United States of America”. The letter concluded by stating that, should the Government of the Argentine Republic wish to resume the project, the institution would seek “another location or combination” to “provide hospitality to the art of its noble country”.⁶⁸

Despite the good auspices, the Southern Cone country did not participate again until 1950. Upon its return, it found the Giardini very different from how it had left them: the number of national pavilions had grown from eight to eighteen, the area of Saint Helena Island had been annexed, and the *Viale alla Motta* was to be incorporated, thereby further expanding the original nucleus by the subsequent year. During the 1950s, the existing problems of space were worsened by the wave of post-war requests for the construction of national pavilions and the panoramic constraint established in 1957. Thus, quick decision-making and financial availability became *conditio sine qua non* to achieve the possession of a pavilion. These circumstances led to the nomadism of Argentina in the ensuing decades, occupying any available spaces in the Giardini, from rooms in the Central Pavilion to temporarily unused pavilions (Czechoslovakia and Finland).⁶⁹

In the 1950s and 1960s, Argentinian participation was almost constant and the desire to build national architecture was expressed on numerous occasions.⁷⁰ The Biennale offered several options but underlined both the existence

66

Letter from Martin Noel to Giovanni Bordiga, Buenos Aires, November 29, 1923 (ASAC, FS, SN PAD, b.15). Prior to this missive, the Biennale had sent requests for updates and news on the construction of the pavilion. Telegram to Martin Noel, November 8, 1923; Letter from Giovanni Bordiga to Martin Noel, Venice, November 22, 1923 (ASAC, FS, SN PAD, b.15).

67

Letter from Giovanni Bordiga and Davide Giordano to Martin Noel, Venice, November 24, 1923; “Progetto di convenzione da stipulare fra il Governo della Repubblica Argentina ed il Comune di Venezia; Convenzione per la costruzione del Padiglione della Repubblica Argentina alla Esposizione Internazionale d’Arte. N. 395336 Seg.”, Venice, July 23, 1925 (ASAC, FS, SN PAD, b.15). The agreement established the lease of the terrain (starting in 1926) for twenty years (renewable at maturity) and the amount to be paid (ten Italian lire per year). The expenses for the construction and maintenance of the pavilion were to be paid by the government of Argentina.

68

Letter from Extraordinary Commissioner to the City of Venice to Fernando Pérez, Venice, September 20, 1929 (ASAC, FS, SN PAD, b.15).

69

In 1950, Argentina occupied the pavilion of Czechoslovakia (current pavilion of the Czech Republic and Slovak Republic). From 1952 to 1966, it exhibited in the rooms of the Central Pavilion (except in 1954 and 1960 when it did not participate), while from 1968 to 1972 it occupied the Finland Pavilion.

70

According to the documentation at the ASAC, requests were made in 1953, 1955, 1956, 1960, 1961 and 1968. See Correspondence between the Venice Biennale and the Embassy of Argentina in Rome (ASAC, FS, SP, b.01).

of few available areas and the fact that it was the municipality of Venice that decided on their assignment. Namely, in 1953, three sites were proposed: the one behind the Danish pavilion, the one to the left of this pavilion adjoining the Montagnola, and the one between the Swiss and Russian pavilions. In 1955, when faced with one new request, the Biennale indicated that there were no areas available. Of the three previously offered, the first one had been vetoed by the municipality and the other two had since been occupied. Furthermore, two other sites had been committed to Japan and India.⁷¹

However, the Biennale pointed out the existence of a project that sought to completely renovate the Central Pavilion and solve the space problems. First of all, the project envisaged moving the location of the building, making this area available to countries that wished to build a pavilion of their own. Secondly, there was the possibility that some of the rooms in the new Central Pavilion would be available for countries to establish their permanent venue.⁷² This new architecture was supposed to be finished in 1958, which ultimately did not happen.

Nevertheless, the project was still in force in 1961, as can be read in the *telespresso* (teletype) from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs to several embassies, among them the Italian Embassy in Buenos Aires.⁷³ The communication reiterated that the saturation of the Giardini and the panoramic constraint did not allow the Biennale to give precise guarantees for the construction of the Argentine pavilion. Simultaneously, the communication referred to the new Central Pavilion as a possible solution to this situation. It was also recommended that the procedures with the municipality start as soon as possible in order to obtain the approval in time.⁷⁴

While Argentina was making these requests, it was participating in some rooms within the Central Pavilion. In 1968, it exhibited in the Finnish pavilion for the first time. Two weeks after the closing of the exhibition, Federico Brook (Curator of the Argentine pavilion, 1968 - 1970) wrote to Giovanni Favaretto Fisca (President of the Venice Biennale, 1968) stating that this experience “made clear, once again, the need to build [Argentina’s] own pavilion”.⁷⁵ According to Brook, the country enjoyed greater freedom to exhibit, and experienced a large turnout from both the public and critics. For this reason, and due to the investment made in refurbishing the wooden architecture, he asked for “its recurring assignment to Argentina for as long as its own has not been built”.⁷⁶ The country exhibited there until 1972; in the remaining editions of the 1970s, the Finnish pavilion was occupied by Portugal, and Argentina did not attend the event at all.⁷⁷

71

As previously explained, the India pavilion was not built.

72

Letter from Mario Novello (Head of the Secretarial Office of the Venice Biennale, 1956-1960) to Erasto M. Villa (Chargé d’Affaires of the Argentine Embassy in Rome), Venice, June 15, 1955 (ASAC, FS, SP, b.01).

73

Telespresso N.31/22876. Rome, July 17 1961 (ASAC, FS, AV, b.122). The *telespresso* with the object “Nuovi padiglioni alla Biennale di Venezia – Argentina ed Artisti maltesi” (New pavilions at the Venice Biennale – Argentina and Maltese Artists) is sent to the Italian Embassies in Buenos Aires and London and to the Italian Consulate in Malta.

74

The recommendation to commence proceedings with the municipality of Venice as soon as possible also appears in other documents. See Letter from Italo Siciliano (President of the Venice Biennale, 1962) to Héctor Solanas Pachecho (Ambassador of Argentina in Rome), Venice, November 10, 1961 (ASAC, FS, AV, b.122).

75

Letter from Federico Brook to Giovanni Favaretto Fisca, Rome, November 5, 1968 (ASAC, FS, SP, b.01).

76

Letter from Brook to Favaretto Fisca, November 5, 1968.

77

In 1974, there was no national participation. In 1976, the Biennale proposed that Argentina exhibit again in the Finnish pavilion. Moreover, considering the condition of the building and the financial effort to rehabilitate it, the Biennale offered it the possibility of exhibiting there until the end of 1980. The Argentine Embassy in Rome communicated that the country would not have participated in the 37th edition. Letter from Carlo Ripa di Meana (President of the Venice Biennale, 1974 - 1978) to Abel Parentini Posse (Consul of Argentina in Venice), Venice, February 21, 1976; Letter from Guillermo A. Cash (Chargé d’Affaires of the Argentine Embassy in Rome) to Carlo Ripa di Meana, Rome, March 31, 1976 (ASAC, FS, AV, b.251).

Latin America and the Cartagena Agreement Countries

Argentina, Iceland, the United Arab Republic and Switzerland have joined the 36th International Biennale Art Exhibition that will open in Venice on June 11. This brings the number of countries that will participate in their own pavilions to twenty-eight, to which are added the Cartagena Agreement countries (Bolivia, Colombia, Chile, Ecuador, Peru), which will build their own pavilions, and those that are part of the Italo-Latin American Institute (Mexico, Cuba, Haiti, Guatemala, Panama, Paraguay).⁷⁸

The Biennale press release, dated March 1, 1972, indicates that fifteen of the twenty Latin American Republics were expected to participate in the 36th Biennale. Some would have done so in national architectures and others in collective pavilions representing new geo-political alliances. For the participations of Cartagena Agreement countries and the Italo-Latin American Institute, Brook was the interlocutor with the Biennale, mainly with Mario Penelope (Deputy Extraordinary Commissioner of the Venice Biennale, 1972). In fact, from 1971 to 1977, Brook was Deputy Cultural Secretary of the Italo-Latin American Institute of Rome (IILA), an intergovernmental organisation created in 1966 as a tool to promote and strengthen relations between Italy and Latin America.⁷⁹

In November 1971, Brook presented the request for the participation of the Italo-Latin American Institute, proposing a series of rotative solo exhibitions.⁸⁰ Furthermore, he started to follow up on the project of the pavilion of the Cartagena Agreement countries, a request made in September of the same year by its executive board.⁸¹ This sub-regional integration pact was signed by Bolivia, Colombia, Chile, Ecuador, and Peru in 1969 and promoted stronger economic, political and social cooperation. In 1970, these countries signed the Andrés Bello Agreement to promote the development of education, science and technology through a process of integration that would have culture as a central axis. The erection of a pavilion to exhibit the art of the Andean countries was then part of its broader cultural policy.⁸²

In an already long-saturated space, the Biennale proposed a site between Russia, Japan, and Germany to the Cartagena Agreement Countries.⁸³ In January 1972, the municipality of Venice gave its approval for the chosen area. Faced with the imminent start of procedures for the cession of the terrain, Mario Penelope recommended “not to lose time and to immediately submit the project”.⁸⁴ In April 1972, the Executive Secretary of the Andrés Bello Agreement communicated the acceptance of the land and entrusted the Italo-Latin American Institute to carry out the formalities. The institute contacted Venetian companies in order to quickly

78

Press release “Altre adesioni alle 36. Biennale di Venezia”, Venice, March 1, 1972 (ASAC, FS, AV, b.183).

79

The IILA was created by the Italian politician Amintore Fanfani (1908-1999), who was then Minister of Foreign Affairs of Italy and President of the General Assembly of the United Nations. The member states of the IILA (today: International Italo-Latin American Organisation) are Italy and the twenty Latin American republics (Argentina, Bolivia, Brazil, Chile, Colombia, Costa Rica, Cuba, Dominican Republic, Ecuador, El Salvador, Guatemala, Haiti, Honduras, Mexico, Nicaragua, Panama, Paraguay, Peru, Uruguay and Venezuela).

80

Letter from Federico Brook to Mario Penelope, Rome, November 11, 1971 (ASAC, FS, AV, b.183).

81

Ibid; Letter from Javier Silva Ruete (Director - Secretary, Board of the Cartagena Agreement - JUNAC, 1970-1976) to Gian Alberto Dell'Acqua, Lima, September 17, 1971 (ASAC, FS, AV, b. 251). In this letter, the Instituto Italo-Latino Americano is already indicated as the intermediary.

82

On the communication of its cultural projects to the Biennale, see Letter from Alejandro Deustua (Ambassador of Peru in Rome) to Mario Penelope, Rome, October 22, 1971 (ASAC, FS, AV, b. 251).

83

This space has finally been occupied by South Korea. This pavilion is the last one to be built in the Giardini, in 1995.

84

Letter from Mario Penelope to Federico Brook, Venice, January 28, 1972 (ASAC, FS, AV, b.251).

obtain the project presented to the municipality and start the works *ipso facto*.⁸⁵ Nevertheless, the exhibition would be opened two months later, which was too short a period for the plan to succeed.

As in the case of the other unrealised pavilions, the project had not been abandoned but postponed. Thus, the eventual representation of Latin America was considerably lower than that announced in March, dwindling from fifteen to seven countries. Of these, Brazil, Venezuela and Uruguay participated in their permanent pavilions, Argentina in a borrowed pavilion, and Chile, Cuba and Peru in the rooms of the Central Pavilion curated by the Italo-Latin American Institute.⁸⁶

The project was officially dropped in 1973. On February 5, Brook wrote to Penelope, informing him that, “for reasons of priority”, the Executive Secretary of the Andrés Bello Agreement had had to “temporarily relinquish the pavilion”.⁸⁷ The next day, Brook wrote to Penelope again asking the Biennale to consider granting the space not used by the Andean group to Mexico. Along with the letter, he sent the Mexican telegram and an architectural project studied “in accordance with the needs of the municipality of Venice”.⁸⁸

Dated February 2, the telegram was sent by Luis Ortiz Macedo, the Director of the National Institute of Fine Arts (1972-1974), the same institution that had organised the national participation in the 1950s with Fernando Gamboa as curator. Ortiz Macedo informed Brook that the budget for the pavilion had been approved and asked him to confirm the possibility of building it “as soon as possible” since funds were available “only for this [that] year”.⁸⁹

The architectural project shows a single-storey building with a metal load-bearing structure. It consists of two main bodies and a central connecting one, complemented by outdoor paving. The room is lit both by full height glazing on all sides of the building and skylights in the roof slab. This project is signed by engineer Giuseppe Svalduz and bears the date of April 22, 1972, which is the month in which the Italian-Latin American Institute had contacted Venetian companies to design and build the pavilion for the Cartagena Agreement countries *ipso facto*. These elements lead one to wonder if the possibility of turning this pavilion into the Mexican pavilion was being considered.⁹⁰

Pavilions, Pavilions, Pavilions

Although not included in the period between 1948 and 1972, there is another event that deserves to be highlighted as an extension of the dynamics described in this article: the construction of precarious pavilions, destined to be dismantled after use. In the proposal to renovate the exhibition spaces at the Giardini, the architect Constantino Dardi explained that the problem of insufficient space and the need to preserve the green areas had been solved by the construction of a prefabricated and temporary pavilion in 1980.⁹¹

⁸⁵

Letter from Federico Brook to Mario Penelope, Rome, April 10, 1972 (ASAC, FS, AV, b.251).

⁸⁶

After this exhibition IILA would not attend the Venice Biennale for fourteen years. From 1985 to 2015, it participated with the Latin America Pavilion - IILA in the section of national participations and Federico Brook was curator in 1986, 1988 and 1990 editions. In the five-year period from 1985 to 1990, Brook was again Deputy Cultural Secretary of the IILA, a position that he had already held from 1971 to 1977 as explained in the Argentina section.

⁸⁷

Letter from Federico Brook to Mario Penelope, Rome, February 5, 1973 (ASAC, FS, AV, b.251).

⁸⁸

Letter from Federico Brook to Mario Penelope, Rome, February 6, 1973 (ASAC, FS, AV, b.251).

⁸⁹

Telegram from Luis Ortiz Macedo to Federico Brook, Mexico City, February 2, 1973 (ASAC, FS, AV, b.251).

⁹⁰

The Biennale's response has not been located in the documents consulted at the ASAC.

⁹¹

Proposta di ristrutturazione degli spazi della Biennale / Arti Visive ai Giardini (ASAC, FS, LGS PAD, b.10). In 1980 the countries that exhibited in the temporary pavilion were Argentina and Peru.

For the 1982 edition, Dardi proposed “reconsidering the idea of the pavilion in the water”, which had obtained the approval of the critics.⁹² The numerous requests for participation led to an increase in the number of temporary structures from one to three pavilions. Two were located on the right side of the *Rio dei Giardini*, parallel to the Del Giudice’s complex and separated by the bridge; one was on the other side of the canal, behind the area occupied by Israel and the United States.⁹³ These precarious architectural pavilions hosted Argentina, Australia, Colombia, Cuba, India, Iceland, the Republic of San Marino, and Peru. Their construction was a major investment for the Biennale and, as in the previous Biennale, it was a non-repayable investment, since they were dismantled at the end of the exhibition.⁹⁴

These pavilions in the water, like the cases analysed above, are an example of the symbolic power that has been created around the possession of (or participation in) a pavilion. They also reveal how the Biennial adopted an original strategy to deal with the limited space available and mitigate the lack of architectural presence of the eight countries (four of which were from Latin America) that exhibited there. In more general terms, the historical period studied shows how the art event opened up to the geographical area in question. Indeed, between 1948 and 1972, numerous letters crossed the Atlantic in which the Biennale either sent invitations to join the event and build a pavilion or received requests to participate and build national architecture.

On several occasions, despite intentions held in common, the projects did not materialise. For example, the first attempt to build the Mexican pavilion was frustrated by the cultural weight of Paris compared to Venice: the country considered that it would be more appropriate to allocate the budget for Fine Arts activities abroad to a temporary exhibition rather than a permanent pavilion. On that occasion, the proposal for the construction of national architecture had been advanced by the Biennale, which, faced with delays in the response, had even offered two spaces: the second one located between the current Swedish and Russian pavilions. In 1953, this site was among the three marked as available to Argentina, following a new request that was not granted. And, although it takes us back to an earlier period, it should be remembered that, in the 1920s, the Biennale reserved a site for Argentina for a long period of time (1923-1929), whose pavilion was never built due to economic reasons and institutional silence. Financial instability also frustrated the aspirations of the Cartagena Agreement countries, which, despite having completed the project on paper, had to abandon their pavilion. The withdrawal of the Andean countries brings us back full-circle to Mexico, which quickly tried to appropriate the available site.

If the reconstruction of these failed attempts suggests that, in the majority of cases, the pavilions were not built for economic reasons, and their hypothetical location in the Giardini forms a completely different topography from the present one. Although speculative, would it not be interesting to superimpose the potential yet invisible history of this space with the visible one? That is to say, to create a map of the Giardini that features the unrealised pavilions and compare it to the current depiction? From this one could see, in the terms exposed by Antoni Muntadas, which countries could be the ones that maintain a privileged position without the need for legitimation and which would need to revalidate their right to be in Venice every two years.

92

Art historian and critic Maurizio Calvesi, member of the Board of Directors in 1982 and Director of the Visual Arts Section of the Biennale in 1984 and 1986 referred to it as a “new and sapient pavilion on the canal” that had made it possible to improve the Biennale’s spaces. Maurizio Calvesi, “Zavorra in laguna”. Newspaper clipping included in the proposal (ASAC, FS, LGS PAD, b.10).

93

“Contratto di appalto per i lavori di realizzazione delle opere edili di 3 (tre) capannoni precari nei Giardini della Biennale da adibirsi a Mostra provvisoria per l’anno 1982” (ASAC, FS, AV, b.345).

94

The high cost meant that, in 1984, the precarious pavilion was built outside the Giardini, close to the entrance. In 1986, the countries without a pavilion participated in the Arsenale.

In this regard, the case of Mexico is significant because it also highlights the randomness of the current urban planning of the Giardini: the first terrain that was offered to Mexico today belongs to Switzerland, the country that had previously been allocated the space currently occupied by Egypt in the Del Giudice's complex. The second one corresponds to the current Venezuelan pavilion although, not long after the Mexican refusal, it had been offered to Argentina. The third one saw the arrival of South Korea, twenty-four years after the attempt to occupy the space left empty by the Andean countries.

It should be noted that what is presented in this article is not characteristic of the period analysed, but rather that the number of cases increases when one consults the documentation preserved in the ASAC. In 1931, the Biennale sent letters to Argentina, Brazil, Chile, Mexico and Uruguay proposing the building of a collective pavilion located on Saint Helena Island. The letters also indicated that "the pavilions of Greece, Poland, Sweden, and Switzerland, the countries with which negotiations have been concluded, will be built on the same island for next year", suggesting that Del Giudice's project was already at an advanced stage.⁹⁵

The planimetry shows a single-story building with a central hall which gives access to five rooms: Argentina and Uruguay on the left, Mexico and Chile on the right, and Brazil at the end.⁹⁶ The pavilion would have been located next to the Romanian one (originally intended for Greece) since Del Giudice's idea was to "close" the short sides of the architectural complex by means of this pavilion itself. Eventually, the agreement with the Latin American countries was not concluded and the presentation of a new project by Greece led to the quick construction of the independent Hellenic pavilion (1934) and the simplification of the Del Giudice's complex.⁹⁷

A short time after this attempt at a collective pavilion, the Biennale received a letter from the Italian Ambassador in Rio de Janeiro. Dated June 14, 1932, the missive explained that the Italian community in Brazil had organised a fund-raising campaign in memory of Anita Garibaldi.⁹⁸ "Instead of erecting a modest monument to Anita in Rio de Janeiro, we thought it would be nice to offer this government, on behalf of the Italian community in Brazil, a permanent pavilion at the Venice Biennale", wrote the Ambassador. The pavilion could be dedicated to the heroine of the two worlds and remain a symbol of "the gratitude of the Italians who found ample hospitality in this country". The Ambassador also claimed that Brazilian artists could be encouraged to "produce ever-improving works, knowing that they can exhibit in the biggest art exhibition in the world".⁹⁹ Ultimately, the Anita Garibaldi pavilion did not come into being either. The documentation suggests that this is again due to the high construction cost, as only about half of the necessary sum was available.¹⁰⁰

Apart from this episode, Brazil is no stranger to the dynamics of the structure of the Biennale. In fact, as has been illustrated, the country had to face the limited availability of space in the Giardini and the failure of architectural projects. However, it finally managed to build a pavilion, and in a position that offers outstanding visibility at that. Moreover, the case of Brazil is undoubtedly interesting because

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Letter from the Venice Biennale proposing the construction of the Latin American Pavilion, Venice, February 19, 1931 (ASAC, FS, SN PAD, b.15). The total amount would have been 500,000 Italian lire, which meant a contribution of 100,000 lire per country.

96

Planimetry of the Latin America Pavilion (ASAC, FS, SN PAD, b.15).

97

Mulazzani, *I Padiglioni della Biennale di Venezia*, 73 and 84.

98

1932 is the fiftieth anniversary of the death of Giuseppe Garibaldi.

99

Letter from Vittorio Cerruti (Ambassador of Italy in Rio de Janeiro) to Giuseppe Volpi di Misurata (President of the Venice Biennale, 1930-1934), Rio de Janeiro, June 14, 1932 (ASAC, FS, SN PAD, b.15).

100

Letter from Giuseppe Volpi di Misurata to Vittorio Cerruti, Venice, July 11, 1932 (ASAC, FS, SN PAD, b.15). The average price of a pavilion was 250,000 - 300,000 Italian lire.

se it has made it possible to mention, albeit very briefly, the existence of relations between art institutions, or to be more precise, between biennials: from the first contacts between Matarazzo and Pallucchini to the role of the founder of the Bienal de São Paulo in the construction of the pavilion.

Even though that is not the aim of this article, it is relevant to point out that the period analysed corresponds to the years in which the biennial model begins to spread globally (e.g., 1951, Hispano-American Biennial; 1952, Tokyo Biennial; 1955 Alexandria Biennial; 1968, India Triennial; or 1973, Sydney Biennial), including in Latin America. Indeed, after São Paulo (1951), biennials were inaugurated in Mexico (1958, InterAmerican Biennial), Argentina (1962, American Art Biennial), Chile (1963, American Biennial of Engraving), Colombia (1968, Coltejer Art Biennial, 1971 American Biennial of Graphic Arts) and Puerto Rico (1970, San Juan Biennial).¹⁰¹

It is interesting to note that the rise of biennials in Latin America corresponds to the rise of the participation (or stated interest in participating) of these countries in the Venice Biennale. By way of example, after Mexico refused to build its pavilion, the country was absent from the Venetian exhibition until 1958, the same year in which the Inter-American Biennial was inaugurated. In the case of the Cartagena Agreement countries, the erection of a pavilion was part of their cultural policy project when Chile and Colombia had already inaugurated biennials in their respective countries. What relationship, if any, exists between the spread of the biennial model in Latin America and the participation of these countries in the Venice Biennale? Furthermore, what new perspectives might emerge from the joint study of the biennial phenomenon and the national pavilions?

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On these biennials, see Adriana Castellanos Olmedo, "Cali, ciudad de la gráfica: las Bienales Americanas de Artes Gráficas del Museo La Tertulia y Cartón de Colombia (1970-1975)", *Caiana*, 8 (2016): 17-30; Emilio Ellena (ed.), *Sobre las bienales americanas de grabado: Chile, 1963-1970* (Santiago de Chile: Centro Cultural de España, 2008); María del Mar González, "Introducción", in *Bienales de San Juan del Grabado Latinoamericano y del Caribe* (San Juan: Museo de Historia, Antropología y Arte / Universidad de Puerto Rico, Recinto de Ríos Piedras, 2015), 4-7; Fabiola Martínez Rodríguez, "Mexico's Interamerican Biennials and the Hemispheric Cold War", *Anales del Instituto de Investigaciones Estéticas*, vol. XLIII, no. 119, (2021): 249-285; María Cristina Rocca and Riccardo Panzetta, "Bienales de Córdoba: arte, ciudad e ideologías", *Estudios*, 10 (1998): 93-108.

Abbreviations

AB FAUUSP Acervo da Biblioteca da Faculdade de Arquitetura e Urbanismo da Universidade de São Paulo - FAUUSP

AHWS Arquivo Histórico Wanda Svevo – Fundação Bienal de São Paulo

ASAC Archivio Sorico delle Arti Contemporanee – La Biennale di Venezia

FS Fondo Storico

AV Arti Visive

LGS PAD Lavori e gestioni delle sedi. Padiglioni

SP Padiglioni, atti 1938-1968 (serie cosiddetta ‘Paesi’)

SN PAD Padiglioni, atti 1897 – 1938 (serie cosiddetta ‘Scatole nere. Padiglioni’)

b busta

Author’s Biography

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	The Role of International Exhibitions in the Aftermath of Empire: The 1948 British Pavilion at the Venice Biennale Claudia Di Tosto Abstract For the 1948 iteration of the Venice Biennale, the first after the Second World War, a painter and a sculptor were chosen to represent Britain: J. M. W. Turner (1775 – 1851), founding figure of the English Romantic landscape genre, and Henry Moore (1898 – 1986), the Yorkshire-born sculptor who had worked as a War Artist for the British Government during the conflict. While the role of early post-war British Pavilions within the context of Western Europe’s politics has already been extensively discussed, this paper will aim instead to position the 1948 British Pavilion against the backdrop of the initial phases of the dismantling of the British Empire. In particular, I will examine the narrative built around Moore’s participation and argue that the insistence on the inherent humanism of his works is linked to the humanitarian rhetoric of the post-war period. Taking as a cue Joel Robinson’s statement that national pavilions at the Venice Biennale represent a “moral dilemma” founded on the alleged economic, cultural and political superiority of some countries over others, I will argue that the 1948 British Pavilion needs to be read within the context of the renewed cultural imperialism that Britain tried to promote at home and abroad as an indirect way of claiming superiority while the independence movements in the former colonised countries were succeeding in dissolving the British Empire. Keywords British Pavilion, Decolonisation, Henry Moore, Post-war humanism, Herbert Read, Britishness		
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The Role of International Exhibitions in the Aftermath of Empire: The 1948 British Pavilion at the Venice Biennale¹

Claudia Di Tosto

Introduction

Remembering the British display of 1948, a review published in *The Burlington Magazine* in 1950 commented: “Visitors to the Biennale in 1948 will recall how austerity and muddled optimism combined to turn the British pavilion into one of the most splendid in the whole exhibition”.² These two terms, austerity and muddled optimism, well described the atmosphere surrounding the organisation of the country’s first participation in the Venice Biennale since 1938, the year after its Pavilion had been taken over by the British Council.³

A pairing that celebrated both the past and the present of British art awaited visitors inside the British Pavilion: the large canvases by J. M. W. Turner (1775-1851), celebrating naval victories and national landmarks while also paying homage to Italian scenes, were grouped with sculptures and drawings by Henry Moore (1898-1986), a Yorkshire man who charmed the Italian critics and fellow artists with his friendly manners.⁴ The choice of Moore to represent Britain would prove to be a success, with the artist earning the prestigious International Sculpture Prize and

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2

“Current and Forthcoming Exhibitions”, *The Burlington Magazine* 92, no. 565 (1950): 120.

3

Originally called British Committee for Relations with Other Countries when it was founded in 1934, the British Council would be renamed as such in 1936.

4

See for instance Lee Miller’s description of Moore in Venice: “He prowled around, stocky, un-Latin, serious, and simple. He talked with Italian-speaking artists and critics, inarticulate, but sculpting his intentions with his hands like an Italian and being interpreted by his fans”. Lee Miller, “The Venice Biennial Art Exposition”, *Vogue* (November 1, 1948), 193-195. The author thanks Dr Rhian Addison McCreanor for drawing her attention to Miller’s review.

fig. 1
Henry Moore at the 1948
Venice Biennale. © British
Council



embarking on a successful international career, aided by the British Council, which resulted in his work becoming emblematic of a quintessentially British art [Fig. 1].⁵

Investigating the national image, the idea of Britishness presented at the British Pavilion in 1948, is the main objective of this article. Focusing on this specific year in relation to the ever-changing and constantly fleeting ideas around what constitutes this “imagined community”⁶ called nation, in Britain’s case means addressing how the decolonisation process, propelled at the end of the Forties by the Independence of India (1947), forced Britain to rebuild its identity at home and abroad. The question of what it meant to be British after the Empire became increasingly salient. I will argue that the 1948 British Pavilion at the Venice Biennale offered a possible answer to this disputed matter: if a formal political, military and governmental control of the former colonies was no longer possible, culture could still play a pivotal role in reinstating Britain’s predominant role on the world’s stage. This

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The close connection between the promotion of Moore’s sculpture abroad in the post-war period and the circulation of specific conceptions of Britishness rooted in the legacy of imperial Britain was extensively illustrated by Paul Overy in an essay that has become a classic of the British art field: Paul Overy, “Lions and Unicorns: The Britishness of Postwar British Sculpture”, *Art in America* 79, no. 9 (1991), 105-110, 153-155.

6

Anderson Benedict, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, rev. ed (London and New York: Verso, 2006).

analysis of the 1948 British Pavilion as an exemplary case study of a renewed cultural imperialism will focus on the narrative built around Henry Moore's participation at the Biennale, in particular on the text that the critic Herbert Read, co-founder in 1946 of the Institute of Contemporary Arts in London, wrote for the exhibition's pamphlet. The aim is to unveil and investigate the connection between the framing of the pavilion and the patronising Western humanist rhetoric promoted by the government.

Before delving into the core argument of this essay, I will outline a brief overview of the 24th Venice Biennale and discuss the 1948 British Pavilion in its specificities, such as the juxtaposition of 19th and 20th century art around which the display was organized. Then, the historical and political context of the time will be delineated to illustrate why 1948 was such a watershed year for Britain. Finally, in the last two sections, I will discuss the connection between the narrative around the British Pavilion and the rhetoric behind post-war Humanism and how it relates to the renewed cultural imperialism that Britain tried to promote at home and abroad after the dissolution of the Empire.

“The first pan-European exhibition of modern art since the War”: the 24th Venice Biennale

The year 1948 marked the reopening of the Biennale after its activities had been interrupted in 1942 due to the worsening of the Second World War. The 24th iteration of the Venice Biennale opened with a rich programme of exhibitions and national participations. Alongside solo shows of Pablo Picasso, Paul Klee, and Oskar Kokoschka, a selection of American and European avant-garde works from the Peggy Guggenheim collection was displayed in the Greek Pavilion, while a landmark group exhibition on French Impressionism was held in the German Pavilion. Described as “the first pan-European exhibition of modern art since the War”,⁷ this eclectic exhibition programme demonstrated the organising committee's effort to contextualise contemporary artistic trends through exhibitions by developing a cohesive art historical narrative, a strategy more akin to museums than the world's fairs on which the Biennale was modelled, as Stefano Collicelli Cagol and Vittoria Martini have highlighted.⁸ The promotion of these exhibitions in the already-temporary setting of the Biennale had a clear political motivation in post-war Italy since the adoption of a supposedly objective discipline like art history in the selection of artists and artworks “aimed to formalise the political neutrality regained by the institution after the fascist dictatorship, as well as to ensure the same neutrality within the new Cold War context”.⁹ Exploited as yet another ideological tool in the arsenal of the Italian Fascist Government after the party had seized the control of the Biennale in 1938, it was clear that there would not be any future for the Venetian exhibition if its cultural autonomy could not be restored. At the same time, however, its internationality, a characteristic that had been central since its very foundation in 1895,¹⁰ meant that the Biennale could be an ideal platform to promote the image of a strong democratic Western Europe, one united by shared cultural values against the rising force of the Communist bloc.¹¹ That these aspects were at the forefront of the Biennale organi-

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Henry Meyric Hughes, “The Promotion and Reception of British Sculpture Abroad, 1948–1960: Herbert Read, Henry Moore, Barbara Hepworth, and the “Young British Sculptors””, *British Art Studies*, no. 3 (July 2016), unpaginated, <https://doi.org/10.17658/issn.2058-5462/issue-03/hmhughes>.

8

Vittoria Martini and Stefano Collicelli Cagol, “The Venice Biennale at Its Turning Points: 1948 and the Aftermath of 1968”, in Noemi de Haro García, Patricia Mayayo, and Jesús Carrillo (eds.) *Making Art History in Europe After 1945* (New York and London: Routledge, 2020): 83–100.

9

Ibid., 84.

10

Clarissa Ricci, “From Obsolete to Contemporary: National Pavilions and the Venice Biennale”, *Journal of Curatorial Studies* 9, no. 1 (April 2020): 10, https://doi.org/10.1386/jcs_00009_1.

11

Nancy Jachec, *Politics and Painting at the Venice Biennale 1948-64: Italy and the Idea of Europe* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2007).

sing committee's objectives is evident in the preface written by the President of the Exposition Giovanni Ponti for the 1948 exhibition catalogue: "Art invites all men, beyond national borders, beyond ideological barriers, to a language that should unite them in a humanistic understanding and a universal family against any Babelic disunity and disharmony".¹²

Thirteen nations were invited to answer this call: Austria, Belgium, Bulgaria, Czechoslovakia, Denmark, Egypt, France, the Netherlands, Poland, the United States, Switzerland, Hungary and Great Britain. The group seemed to have been largely made up of countries that had been united in the Allied block against the Axis powers, the coalition between Nazi Germany, the Fascist Kingdom of Italy, and Imperial Japan. Their selection thus evidences how much politics affected the organisation of the Biennale as the newly-established Republic of Italy attempted to distance itself from its Fascist past and connection with the Nazi regime; simultaneously, it indicates how important the Biennale was considered to be in forging new diplomatic relationships in the aftermath of the war.

The juxtaposition of nineteenth and twentieth century art at the British Pavilion

"There is no doubt that this year's Biennale is a much more important event than usual", stated an internal report of the British Council.¹³ This was indeed the case not only for political and historical reasons, but also owing to the fact that Britain had been missing from the Biennale for ten years. When it was confirmed that the Biennale would return in 1948 and that Britain would be among the attending countries, the Biennale Committee initially offered to host the British delegation in two rooms of the Italian Pavilion, most probably because of structural damage to the British Pavilion when it was commandeered by the Italian army during the war. Yet soon after the Biennale Committee took back the offer as the number of artists to be displayed in the Italian Pavilion had increased.¹⁴

As already mentioned at the beginning of this article, two artists were selected for the British Pavilion in 1948: J. M. W. Turner, an artist widely considered to be a founding figure of the English Romantic landscape genre, and Henry Moore, the Modernist sculptor of highly recognisable curved human figures who had been employed as an official War Artist during the conflict.¹⁵ The juxtaposition of 19th and 20th century art and the decision to display only two artists instead of a large group, two novelties introduced for this biennial, were unanimously considered as determining factors for the sweeping success of the British Pavilion among critics and public alike. An internal report compiled by a British Council representative, dated June 1948, stated: "In my view our decision to exhibit one old master and one contemporary artist was exceptionally successful" as it also sidestepped the problem of a partial representation of artists which was usually the case in this kind of international exhibitions.¹⁶ The minutes from a British Council Fine Arts Committee's meeting

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XXIV Biennale di Venezia. *Catalogo. Quarta edizione definitiva*, exh. cat., 4th ed. (Venice: Edizioni Serenissima, 1948), X. Translated from Italian by the author.

13

Richmond, The National Archives, BW 78/2. These words are an extract from a report quoted in: British Council, Fine Arts General Committee, Minutes of the 39th Meeting held at 43 Portland Place, W.1. on Wednesday February 25th 1948, at 2:30 pm.

14

Richmond, The National Archives, BW 40/42, letter from Rodolfo Palluchini dated January 20, 1948.

15

The War Artists' Advisory Committee (WAAC) was established in 1939 and headed by Kenneth Clark (then director of the National Gallery in London) with the aim of enlisting artists to produce works documenting the conflict. The WAAC was a propaganda tool of the Ministry of Information but it also created an efficient system of financial support for artists during the war. See for instance: Matthew Withy, *A Fine Tomorrow: Sculpture and Socialism in Mid-Century Britain*, Henry Moore Institute Essays on Sculpture 39 (Leeds: Henry Moore Institute, 2003), unpaginated.

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Richmond, The National Archives, BW 2/377, Extract from report on file IT/701/5 attached to letter reference of 3rd July, 1948, from Representative, Rome to Overseas Division "C".

held in September 1948 further reported that:

the selection of two artists, Turner and Moore, as the British representation had been a most outstanding success; even the French, who had shows of quite a small number of artists, were criticised for showing the works of too many. It seemed probable that the resulting tendency would be to cut down the number of artists and amplify the representation of a few in future international exhibitions.¹⁷

This strategy was praised by art critics as well. Douglas Cooper, reviewer of the Biennale for the *Burlington*, wrote: “The foreign pavilions fell into two clear groups: those in which two or three artists were presented comprehensively and well, and those in which anything from fifteen to fifty were uselessly represented by one work each”, with the British Pavilion included, of course, in the former.¹⁸ This new “felicissima formula”¹⁹ (translated in “most delightful formula” – in the words of the Biennale’s General Secretary Rodolfo Pallucchini) would indeed be replicated in the 1950 Pavilion which saw the participation of Barbara Hepworth (1903-1975) and Matthew Smith (1879-1959), alongside John Constable (1776-1837).

Pallucchini had strongly encouraged the Pavilion’s Selection Committee to choose these two artists as Britain’s representatives because one, Turner, would have provided “an excellent foundation for the beginnings of French Impressionism, to which the Biennale is dedicating a great exhibition”, while the other, Moore, was widely considered the most important living sculptor in Britain.²⁰ His

fig. 2

On the right John Rothenstein, Director of Tate Gallery and Commissioner of the 1948 British Pavilion, accompanying the President of the Italian Luigi Einaudi (centre) for a visit around the pavilion. © Archivio Storico della Presidenza della Repubblica / The Historical Archive of the Presidency of the Republic



¹⁷

Richmond, The National Archives, BW 2/377, Minutes of the 41st Meeting held at 43, Portland place, W.1. on Wednesday, 22nd September, 1948, at 2:30 P.M.

¹⁸

Douglas Cooper, “24th Biennial Exhibition, Venice”, *The Burlington Magazine* 90, no. 547 (1948): 290.

¹⁹

XXIV Biennale di Venezia, p. XV.

²⁰

Richmond, The National Archives, BW 40/42, letter from Rodolfo Pallucchini dated January 20, 1948.

request was granted despite some resistance from the British Council in displaying Turner's works in a building that was not in optimal condition.²¹ While paintings by Turner were displayed in the three front rooms of the Pavilion (including the larger, central room), the long corridor at the back of the building and the two smallest rooms on each side were occupied by Moore's sculptures and drawings.²² The layout of the building meant that visitors would first encounter the Turners in the main room, then those in one of the side rooms; from there they would move toward the back and see the Moore exhibition and then finish the visit with Turner again.²³ The Turner works on display belonged to the Tate Collection and also included some of the artist's Italian paintings such as *Bridge of Sighs, Ducal Palace and Custom-House, Venice: Canaletti Painting* (exhibited 1833, oil on mahogany) and *The Arch of Constantine, Rome* (c. 1835, oil on canvas). The Director of the Tate Gallery John Rothenstein [Fig. 2], who was also Commissioner of the Pavilion, travelled to Venice to supervise the final touches on the installation, also altering the hanging of some of the paintings.²⁴

As for Moore's works, the artist himself arrived in Venice a few days before the opening to oversee the display arrangements. The layout, drawn by Moore and the British Council's Fine Art Department back in UK, had to be heavily modified when the works arrived in Venice. Moore's idea was to display the sculptures in the two smaller rooms on both sides of the long corridor, as these had overhead lightning only. However, a lack of available space meant that the corridor with the windows had to be used as well, since "the effect of it all concentrated in the two small rooms was that of a primaeval forest".²⁵ The windows were thus screened to avoid the reflection of the green vegetation of the Giardini on the opposite wall where most of the drawings were hung. Some of the designs for the sculptures were displayed in the two smaller rooms and even the pillars of the window-wall were equipped with canvas screens so that more drawings could be hung there. The direct involvement of Rothenstein and Moore during the installation phase proved to be crucial for the successful display of the British Pavilion, and resulted in giving the pavilion "the finish of a permanent collection, not often obtained at an exhibition of the nature of the Biennale".²⁶ These words reflect an art historical approach to the display that confirms the aforementioned museological turn of the Biennale in 1948 and the desire for a museum-quality display, rather than one that felt provisional.

The Pavilion's display arrangement did not facilitate a direct comparison between the two artists since their works were kept neatly separated. It is also important to remember that this grouping had more to do with meeting Pallucchini's request than with an unprompted decision by the British Council. Nonetheless, the pairing of Turner's atmospheric landscapes, with their reassuring celebration of traditional values (see for example '*Hurrah! for the Whaler Erebus! Another Fish!*' (exhibited 1846) [Fig. 3], celebrating the vessel that, along with the *Terror*, had participated in major Arctic explorations during the 19th century), and the barren backgrounds found in some of Moore's studies (see for example *Crowd Looking at a Tied-up Object*, 1942) [Fig. 4], sorrowful wastelands that seemed to echo the deso-

21

Richmond, The National Archives, BW 40/42, report dated March 3, 1948 and signed A. A. Longden.

22

Hughes, "The Promotion and Reception of British Sculpture Abroad, 1948-1960". At the National Archives, the floor plan of the 1948 British Pavilion and the display layout of Turner's works are preserved in the folder BW 2/377.

23

Richmond, The National Archives, BW 40/42, Report on the Turner and Moore exhibition, British Pavilion, Venice Biennale, June-September 1948, 11.

24

Ibid., 12.

25

Richmond, The National Archive, BW 40/42, Report on the Turner and Moore exhibition, British Pavilion, Venice Biennale, June – September 1948, 13. The articulation of the display can be glimpsed in promotional photographs of Moore in the Pavilion and official shots taken during the visit of the President of the Italian Republic Luigi Einaudi, but no images of the installation itself could be retrieved.

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Ibid., 15.

fig. 3
Turner, 'Hurrah! for the
Whaler Erebus! Another Fish!',
exhibited 1846, oil paint on
canvas, Tate, London, 1228
× 1528 × 160 mm (framed
dimensions). © Tate



fig. 4
Henry Moore, *Crowd Looking at
a Tied-up Object*, 1942, pencil,
wax crayon, charcoal (rubbed),
watercolour, wash, pen and ink,
The British Museum, London:
from the Estate of Lord Clark,
432 x 559 mm. © The Henry
Moore Foundation.



lation of the war, appeared to encapsulate Britain's post-war desire to promote the new through a direct association with the past.²⁷ The Biennale's correspondent for *The Sunday Times*, for instance, wrote: "The two artists could have not been better chosen. What other painter but Turner could have opened Italian eyes to the strangeness and scope of the English genius?"²⁸

Moore's works on display offered an excursus of the sculptor's activity from the mid-1920s until the most recent sculptures made in 1946-47 and covered a range of his predominant subjects: Madonna and Child, reclining figures, and family groups.²⁹ Although it is not possible to determine the reasoning behind the selection of each piece, reading through the loan request letters makes it clear that the final display largely depended upon the availability of each work and the willingness of lenders.³⁰ The drawings gave the public a rare insight into the working method of Moore, who used to fill the same page with a variety of ideas, biomorphic figures methodically lined up next to each other on the page and projects for sculptures inserted in bare landscapes, "working new images on top of earlier pencil studies or reworking to a higher degree of finish in ink an underlying pencil sketch".³¹ The success of the drawing display was so widespread that even a review of the following iteration of the Pavilion mentioned it: "Moore's drawings last year were an object of pilgrimage".³²

Among the highlights were five bronze maquettes for the Madonna and Child commissioned by the Parish Church of St. Matthew in Northampton in 1943 which marked the return of Moore to public sculpture after the war.³³ One of the contemporary reviewers of the Pavilion notably declared that the maquettes for Northampton's Madonna and Child represented one of the very few occasions when Europeans might "think of Britain in connection with religious art".³⁴ Four out of five maquettes belonged to the Tate Gallery Collection; one came from the private collection of the artist's wife, Mrs. Irina Moore. The small bronzes showed the Madonna seated on a low bench holding the Child, with each maquette representing a slight variation on the same subject, including the piece that most closely resembles the final Northampton version. Here the Child is seated but his legs are propped up, hinting at a vivacity that has not been fully quieted, while the Madonna has her right hand on the Child's shoulder and her left cradles one of her son's. The severity and aloofness of the Northampton sculpture evoked not only that of the Renaissance (Donatello especially) but also recalled the reclining figures of the shelter drawings realised by Moore between 1940 and 1941 in his official role as War Artist. These sketches had earned him a sweeping popularity both at home and abroad and a small selection was on display in Venice.

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According to Roger Berthoud, the tied-up object of the drawing was inspired by Moore's student years at the Royal College of Art, where in-progress sculptures would be covered by damp cloths tied with strings to keep the clay moist. See: Roger Berthoud, *The Life of Henry Moore* (London: Faber and Faber, 1987), 206-207.

28

Eric Newton, "The Venetian Biennale-II", *The Sunday Times* (20 June 1948), 7

29

For the full list of Turner and Moore's works on display in the 1948 Pavilion see: "Padiglione della Gran Bretagna" in XXIV *Biennale di Venezia*, 274-284.

30

The loan request letters and the lenders' replies are held in the folder BW 2/376 at the National Archives.

31

Richard A. Born, *From Blast to Pop: Aspects of Modern British Art, 1915-1965* (Chicago: David and Alfred Smart Museum of Art, University of Chicago, 1997), 55.

32

"THE VENICE BIENNALE: Wanted---a Patron", *The Manchester Guardian* (24 August 1950), 4.

33

Andrew Stephenson, "Fashioning a Post-War Reputation: Henry Moore as a Civic Sculptor c.1943-58", in *Henry Moore: Sculptural Process and Public Identity* (Tate Research Publication, 2015), <https://www.tate.org.uk/art/research-publications/henry-moore/andrew-stephenson-fashioning-a-post-war-reputation-henry-moore-as-a-civic-sculptor-c1943-r1151305>, accessed July 2023.

34

Atticus, 'Men, Women and Memories', *The Sunday Times* (23 May 1948), 5.

Britishness at the end of the Second World War, the British Pavilion seemed to claim, coincided with a reverence for the past, the importance of nature and landscape (the reclining female figures of Moore were inspired by the sloping hills of his native Yorkshire) and a rhetoric of unanimity and stability in the present. As Catherine Jolivet has highlighted in her monograph on the relationship between the landscape genre in the 1950s and British national identity, this Janus-like stance, which aimed to look both at the past and the future of British art simultaneously, was also adopted in the Festival of Britain in 1951.³⁵ The insistence on a native cultural heritage that went unbroken from Romantic painters to contemporary artists also suggests an unwillingness to build the future on new premises as the present constantly needed to be validated through the past. The question remains: what does this all mean within the context of that pivotal year for decolonisation that was 1948?

The historical context of the 1948 British Pavilion

The British Pavilion [Fig. 5] was – and still is – housed in a building that had previously been a café-restaurant built in 1887 for the antecedent of the Biennale, the Esposizione Nazionale Artistica, and then altered by the architect Edwin Alfred Rickards.³⁶ Even though the raised position of the former café, up on a mound in the Giardini, offered the perfect privileged position for a national pavilion, there had been a unanimous consensus among the representatives of the British Council to construct a new building, though nothing came of it.³⁷ As Bowness pointed out: “The shift from private benefaction by rich patrons to governmental support for the arts in Britain which was dominant after the Second World War was mirrored in the history of the British Pavilion”.³⁸ Indeed, the early post-war editions of the British Pavilion largely reflected the welfare policy of the Labour Party, which had won the election in June 1945, and the role of art within it. However, other major changes marked the post-war period for Britain, as a quick succession of events led to the be-

fig. 5
The British Pavilion © British Council



³⁵

Catherine Jolivet, *Landscape, Art and Identity in 1950s Britain* (Farnham and Burlington, Vt: Ashgate, 2009).

³⁶

The word 'Biennale' itself was introduced only in 1930. See Sophie Bowness and Clive Phillpot (eds.), *Britain at the Venice Biennale, 1895-1995* (London: British Council, 1995), 51.

³⁷

Ibid., 35, n. 45.

³⁸

Ibid., 29.

ginning of the dismantling of the British Empire and to a large-scale migration from the former colonies. In 1947 India gained Independence and, following the Partition, Pakistan was created. In June 1948 the Empire Windrush arrived at Tilbury Docks in Essex carrying the first wave of Caribbean migrants that came to be known as Windrush Generation, and in July of the same year the British Nationality Act created the status of Citizen of the United Kingdom and Colonies, establishing that migrants from the former colonies already had the status of British citizens. 1948 also saw both the start of the Malayan Emergency which led to the country's independence in 1957 and the Accra Riots which began the process towards Ghana's eventual independence in the same year. 1948 also marked the start of Apartheid in South Africa, which would last until the early 1990s, and the independence of Burma (Myanmar) and Ceylon (Sri Lanka). In 1949 the London Declaration formally established the Commonwealth of Nations on the principle that all member states were free and equal.

The decline of the British Empire was part of a broader shift from a political order based on empires to one centred around nation states but, unlike other former imperial nations and despite the enormous human cost and economic decline caused by the war, 20th-century Britain was still, as Sarah Stockwell argues, “at the centre of an empire larger than any other, and a co-architect of the post-war settlement”.³⁹ Furthermore, as was to be expected, Britain's involvement in its old dominions' politics did not stop altogether with their newly-gained independence and the economic, political, and cultural bonds between both sides remained strong.

Outlining the historical setting in which the 1948 Pavilion was organised and inaugurated reveals the importance of recontextualising the early post-war British Pavilions within the decolonisation process after the Second World War. This framework not only represents an original approach to the study of the history of the British Pavilion, which, until now, has been mainly considered in relation to Britain's role within the context of Western Europe's politics;⁴⁰ it is also pivotal for a more comprehensive understanding of the complex intertwining between bureaucracy and art system enacted through the national pavilion system at the Biennale. Joel Robinson has argued that the Biennale's national pavilion system reflected a geopolitical structure that is fundamentally in contrast with participating countries' aspirations towards a more democratic and egalitarian Europe after the Second World War.⁴¹ Thanks to its international scope, the Biennale could indeed foster diplomatic cooperation across countries when it was most needed. However, the predominant – and almost exclusive – presence of First World nations in the Giardini made clear how the Venice exhibition had inherited the unevenness of a colonial world order.⁴² The national pavilions thus represent a “moral dilemma”, embedded as they are in an inherent cultural imperialism founded on the alleged economic, cultural and political superiority of these nations.⁴³

39

Sarah Elizabeth Stockwell, “Britain and Decolonization in an Era of Global Change”, in Martin Thomas and Andrew S. Thompson (eds.), *The Oxford Handbook of the Ends of Empire* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018), 66, <https://doi.org/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780198713197.013.4>. Although dated, David Goldsworthy's book offers an in-depth analysis of both the Labour and Conservative approaches to the decolonisation process in the post-war years: David Goldsworthy, *Colonial Issues in British Politics 1945-1961: From 'Colonial Development' to 'Wind of Change'* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1971).

40

Jachec, *Politics and Painting at the Venice Biennale 1948-64*.

41

Joel Robinson, “Folkloric Modernism – Venice's Giardini Della Biennale and the Geopolitics of Architecture”, *The Open Arts Journal*, no. 2 (February 2014), <https://doi.org/10.5456/issn.2050-3679/2013w04jr>.

42

As is well known, the situation has not improved much as, even nowadays, so-called Global South countries are largely relegated to collateral locations around Venice.

43

Robinson, “Folkloric Modernism”, 4.

Humanism and Decolonisation

The text on Henry Moore for the exhibition booklet written by Herbert Read, who was part of the British Council's Fine Art Committee, offered an introduction to the artist's life, achievements and influences.⁴⁴ A shorter version, published (in Italian) in the general catalogue of the 24th Biennale, had been edited by Lilian Somerville, Head of the Fine Art Section at the British Council, and endorsed by Moore himself before being sent to Read's wife for the art historian's final approval.⁴⁵ The importance that the exhibition booklets, one for Turner and one for Moore, had for the British Council appears evident from internal reports where the "only serious mishap in connection with the Biennale" was a delay in the delivery of the catalogues, which did not arrive in time for the press conference.⁴⁶ The exhibition booklets represented crucial promotional tools in the Biennale setting, so much so that their late arrival was considered to have badly affected sales.⁴⁷

Read's 1948 text has been discussed previously within a European framework: for instance, Henry Meyric Hughes stated that Moore's catalogue entry highlighted the affiliation between British art and the European tradition,⁴⁸ differently from Nancy Jachec who had argued that these connections were made clear only in 1952 and that both Moore and Hepworth "were presented as the products of world, as opposed to specifically European, culture".⁴⁹ However, as explained above, any analysis of the 1948 British Pavilion that takes into consideration exclusively the context of Britain's relationship with the rest of Europe offers only a limited view; its early post-war iterations can be better understood in relation to a broader context involving the exhibition's history, curatorial choices and world politics. Therefore, what I propose is to look at Read's text from a postcolonial perspective through a discussion of how the narrative built around Moore's participation reiterated the specific kind of rhetoric that was being used to talk about decolonisation in the post-war period. The point here is not to retrospectively ascribe a contemporary meaning to Read's words, but to show how the use of certain terms had a specific significance in the post-war period, which was neither neutral nor only pertinent to art criticism, but participated in, and should therefore be read against, a broader social, political and historical context.⁵⁰

After having identified Moore's influences, from Mexican sculpture and Viking carvings to Brancusi and Giacometti, Read wrote: "It must be emphasised that, in spite of his concentration on formal values, Moore remains a humanist".⁵¹ Read further argued that Moore's commitment to a universal language led the sculptor to the truth of the materials, a facet of the work which made it coherent despite its broad range of themes and scope. In the conclusion, Read declared that Moore had succeeded, more than any other modern sculptor, in "combining formal

44

Sculpture and Drawings by Henry Moore (Text by Herbert Read) (London: British Council, 1948).

45

Richmond, The National Archives, BW 2/377, GB/641/25, letter dated 15th April 1958 from Lilian Somerville to Mrs. Read.

46

Richmond, The National Archives, BW 2/377, Extract from report of "Tour by Representative and Mrs. Bottrall of Venice and Northern Ireland, June 1948". See also Richmond, The National Archives, BW 40/42, Report on the "Turner and Moore Exhibition British Pavilion Biennale Venice June-September 1948", pp. 14-15. Moore's catalogues arrived in time for the public opening on June 6th while Turner's did not arrive until the 18th of the same month.

47

Richmond, The National Archives, BW 2/377, Extract from report, June 1948.

48

Hughes, "The Promotion and Reception of British Sculpture Abroad, 1948-1960".

49

Nancy Jachec, "The "New British Sculpture" at the Venice Biennale: Europeanism and Its Limits", *The British Art Journal* 7, no. 1 (April 2006): 25-32.

50

As argued by Kevin Davey, in the inter-war years Read clearly replicated imperialist tropes in his surveys of art and civilization. See Kevin Davey, "Herbert Read and Englishness", in David Goodway (ed.), *Herbert Read Reassessed* (Liverpool: University Press, 1998), 270-286.

51

Sculpture and Drawings by Henry Moore (Text by Herbert Read), unpagged.

dynamism with inherent *animism*” meaning that, despite the formal experimentations, his sculptures had not lost that emotional quality that was necessary for an engagement with the wider audience.⁵² Read’s words were echoed in the documentary about Henry Moore written and produced by the art historian’s son, John Read, and broadcast in 1951 by the BBC, becoming the first film on British television about a living artist.⁵³ Moore’s works’ main qualities were identified in “a tradition of expressiveness and truth to material”,⁵⁴ which also clarified the emotional aspect praised in the Venice catalogue: the interest in the formal quality of shapes could easily have led to pure abstraction, but in Moore’s case the human figure was still readable and thus the wider audience could easily find both personal and universal connections in the subjects depicted. The documentary also placed a great importance on explaining the artist’s working process from start to finish, a perspective that recalled the choice to show drawings alongside sculptures at the Pavilion and thereby offer a glimpse into Moore’s creative practice.

The traditional humanistic reading of Moore’s works, initiated by Read, is clearly linked to the role of the artist in post-war Britain. Coming from a working-class socialist background, Moore was the prototype of the ideal artist for the welfare state, which considered public art as an important part of the country’s infrastructure and a tool to educate the wider public in the principles of social idealism and civic optimism, values central to the reconstruction of the country.⁵⁵ Moore himself was extremely conscious of the social responsibility of the artist towards society, a subject that he discussed on the occasion of the UNESCO International Conference of Artists held, significantly, in Venice in 1952.⁵⁶ Nonetheless, when Moore declared that “We live in a transitional age, between one economic structure of society which is in dissolution and another economic order of society which has not yet taken definite shape”, an awareness of the drastic changes that the decolonization process had started can also be perceived, especially if we consider the date of this speech.⁵⁷

What is most relevant here, however, is that the reference to humanism in an international setting such as the Biennale evoked the kind of rhetoric that was being used by the British government in the same period to present decolonisation “as the fulfilment of a British mission rather than a body-blow to prestige and national interests”, a narrative that suffused humanism with a patronising humanitarian tone towards the former colonies and their striving towards independence.⁵⁸ Still in 1956, the Colonial Office civil servant Charles Jefferies argued that: “I think there is too much tendency to consider whether these places are “ready” for Statehood. Of course they are not, any more than the Gold Coast is “ready” for independence, or than one’s teenage daughter is “ready” for the proverbial latch-key”.⁵⁹

52

Ibid. In italics in the original text.

53

“Henry Moore and the Festival of Britain”, *The Henry Moore Foundation website*: <https://www.henry-moore.org/about-henry-moore/biography/a-symbol-of-post-war-optimism/adhoc/henry-moore-and-the-festival-of-britain>, accessed July 2023.

54

John Read, dir. *Henry Moore*, BBC, 1951, 00:01:18 – 00:01:20, <https://www.bbc.co.uk/archive/henry-moore/znkkf4j>, accessed July 2023.

55

Dawn Pereira, “Henry Moore and the Welfare State”, in *Henry Moore: Sculptural Process and Public Identity* (Tate Research Publication, 2015) <https://www.tate.org.uk/art/research-publications/henry-moore/dawn-pereira-henry-moore-and-the-welfare-state-r1151315>, accessed July 2023.

56

Henry Moore, “The Sculptor in Modern Society”, in *Henry Moore: Sculptural Process and Public Identity* (presented at the Unesco, International Conference of Artists, Venice, 1952) <https://www.tate.org.uk/art/research-publications/henry-moore/henry-moore-the-sculptor-in-modern-society-r1175901>, accessed July 2023.

57

Ibid.

58

Stockwell, “Britain and Decolonization in an Era of Global Change”, 16.

59

Quoted in Nicholas Owen, “Decolonisation and Postwar Consensus”, in Harriet Jones and Michael Kandiah (ed.), *The Myth of Consensus: New Views on British History, 1945-64*, Contemporary History in Context Series (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 1996), 166, https://doi.org/10.1007/978-1-349-24942-8_9. The double quotation marks are in the original text.

The rhetoric of post-war Humanism

Based on the Renaissance principles of placing human experience at the centre of the universe and on the self-determination and self-sufficiency of the individual, in post-war Europe humanism became closely intertwined with national identity and modernity.⁶⁰ However, postcolonial theorists have challenged humanism and its supposed universality and rationality as something “advanced by colonial apologists, who used ‘civilizing mission’ as a rhetorical humanist device to cultivate social hierarchies and the violence required to maintain them”.⁶¹ It is difficult to not see a similar way of thinking behind the rhetoric around the independence of the colonies as the humanitarian fulfilment of the imperial mission, a narrative also needed to legitimise the continuing presence of Britain in its old dominions, supposed to last until they could achieve the necessary “maturity” for self-government.⁶² Furthermore, it has been argued that the humanist perception of cultural identity is not only Western-centric but essentially rooted in difference, providing the basis for colonial expansion.⁶³ A strong argument in favour of this thesis is the concept of the “civilization of the universal” promoted by the humanist European Society of Culture (Société Européenne de Culture, also known as SEC), a body created in 1950 in Venice by a group of European intellectuals.⁶⁴ This idea of “a universal civilization as a permanent solution to international political conflict” was based on the premise that culture had the ability to create universal values.⁶⁵ However, SEC’s stance was that only Europe could have a leading role in this process.⁶⁶

This analysis of post-war humanist rhetoric and its interconnections with the decolonisation process might appear only distantly relevant for an analysis of the 1948 Biennale or the British Pavilion. Nevertheless, there are three elements that can be brought forward in support of the opposite contention. First, Giovanni Ponti, President of the Exposition, would go on to become a member and one of the strongest advocates of the SEC, which was established in 1950, only two years after the 24th Venice Biennale.⁶⁷ Thus, an understanding of the discussion around the “civilization of the universal” and the Eurocentric stance behind the humanism of the SEC, becomes essential to correctly contextualise his words in the Preface for the 1948 catalogue, where, as noted above, the Italian translation of Read’s text was published. In the Preface Ponti spoke about the role of art in creating a universal language that could unite all individuals “in a humanistic understanding”, meaning a humanistic, *Eurocentric* understanding. The insistence on Moore’s humanism in Read’s text for the British Pavilion needs to be read within this context. Second, the affinities between Herbert Read’s writing and thinking and SEC’s own ethos appear to have been strong enough for the *Société*’s own members to repeatedly ask the English art critic to join their ranks, as revealed by a series of insightful letters from the

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For a close reconstruction of how morality and politics came together in post-war France, a country that shared an imperial past with Britain, see: Michael Kelly, “Humanism and National Unity: The Ideological Reconstruction of France”, in Nicholas Hewitt (ed.), *The Culture of Reconstruction: European Literature, Thought and Film, 1945-50* (London: Palgrave Macmillan UK, 1989), 103-19, https://doi.org/10.1007/978-1-349-19728-6_7.

61

Malreddy Pavan Kumar, “Review Essay: Humanism and Its Other: Difference and Disjuncture in Postcolonial Theory”, *Distinktion: Scandinavian Journal of Social Theory* 10, no. 1 (4 March 2011): 87. Single quotation mark in the original text.

62

Owen, “Decolonisation and Postwar Consensus”, 157-81.

63

Lidan Lin, “The Irony of Colonial Humanism: ‘A Passage to India’ and the Politics of Posthumanism”, *Ariel* 28, no. 4 (October 1997): 133.

64

Nancy Jachec, *Europe’s Intellectuals and the Cold War: The European Society of Culture, Post-War Politics, and International Relations* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2015).

65

Ibid., 73.

66

This concept was however to be contested by those SEC’s member that were closer to the former colonies. *Ibid.*, 73.

67

Ibid., 40.

late 1960s held in the Herbert Read Archive at the University of Leeds. Despite flattering comments and high praise from both Umberto Campagnolo, General Secretary of the SEC, and George Buchanan, Chairman of the British chapter, Read nevertheless refused to join.⁶⁸ In his letter to Buchanan dated March 3, 1967, he explained that his reticence revolved around two crucial points: SEC's view on the universality of poetry and the idea that intellectuals were always on the side of the people. "It is simply not true", argued Read, "the man of culture is nearly always an individualist and essentially aristocratic".⁶⁹

Third, Western humanistic rhetoric clearly fed into the narrative that Britain used to present itself through cultural events of the period such as the aforementioned Festival of Britain of 1951, whose scope was to celebrate the technological achievements of the country. In the film produced to promote the Festival, the narrator celebrates the diversity of this "big family" represented by the British Isles, "as different as the countryman and the scientist", but also declares that "We are too small to stand alone" and that a communion across the Atlantic is a necessity.⁷⁰ Yet despite its humanistic stance promoting international collaboration, the film does not fail to avow Britain's superiority towards its former colonies, mentioning "the idea of the Parliament itself that spread until the Ganges", an explicit attempt to reinstate Britain's influence on India post-Independence.⁷¹

Conclusion

In a series of reports relating to the Pavilion from the Sixties following concerns over the high cost involved in organising such a demanding exhibition, the Biennale was regarded as an unrivalled "sounding board and shop window"⁷² whose impact "is very far from being confined to Italy or even Western Europe"⁷³ with the 1948 iteration brought into the discussion multiple times as evidence of the importance of Britain's participation in the Venetian art event.⁷⁴ This importance wasn't only cultural, but political as well. Events such as the Biennale or the Festival of Britain were an occasion for Britain to enact a new form of cultural imperialism which could not assume the same characteristic of blatant subjection as in the past and had

68

Leeds, University of Leeds, Herbert Read Collection, class mark: BC MS 20c Herbert Read/11/125. See in particular the letter from George Buchanan to Read dated 6 March 1967, and the one sent by Umberto Campagnolo on May 16, 1967.

69

Leeds, University of Leeds, Herbert Read Collection, class mark: BC MS 20c Herbert Read/11/125, letter from Herbert Read to George Buchanan, March 3, 1967. The English art critics concludes writing: "'Dialogue' is another thing, and I am all in favour of that. I am all in favour of developing mutual understanding in so far as the language barriers permit it. But is also in favour of preserving certain values which depend on the integrity of each language and of the traditions based on it. In such circumstances can I subscribe to the ideals of S.E.C.?". Buchanan replies to his concerns as follows (March 6, 1967): "In reply to your letter and your question: of course you are the ideal member of SEC. No one has done more for cross-fertilisation than you. To be an individualist, and aristocratic, is the right qualification. An aristocrat wants the best world." (underscored in the original, author's note).

70

The film was entitled *Family Portrait - A Film on the Theme of the Festival of Britain* and directed by Humphrey Jennings. It can be watched here: http://archive.org/details/family_portrait_festival_of_britain_1951_humphrey_jennings, accessed July 2023. For a thorough discussion on the persistence of imperial discourse in many aspects of the Festival see John M. MacKenzie, 'The Persistence of Empire in Metropolitan Culture', in Stuart Ward (ed.), *British Culture and the End of Empire*, (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2001), 21-36.

71

Family Portrait, 00:12:51.

72

Richmond, The National Archives, BW 40/86, GB/641/1(a), Notes on Venice Biennale by Lilian Somerville to Philip Hendy, August 1964, 2. Philip Hendy was Director of the National Gallery at the time.

73

Richmond, The National Archives, BW 40/86, ITA/641/1(a), Report signed E.N. Gummer, 11th August 1964.

74

Beside the two archival references above, see also Richmond, The National Archives, BW 40/86, Report signed Philip Hendy, August 7, 1964.

thus to find new, indirect ways of claiming superiority even when, and especially because, the independence movements and anti-colonial struggles were succeeding in dissolving, at least formally, the British Empire. In the international setting of these cultural events, building a narrative that used humanism as a tool to support the idea that what was happening in the former colonies was actually the fulfilment of colonialism's purpose formed a pivotal part of that process of the "forgetting and disavowal of empire" which Faulkner and Ramamurthy have identified as a characteristic of the discourse around decolonisation in the cultural sphere.⁷⁵

Decades later, the ghost of the British Empire still hovers over the Giardini. In 1997 the artist Rachel Whiteread, the first woman to represent Britain with a solo show, significantly described the pavilion as "that imperial building, up on a hill at the end of the avenue".⁷⁶ More recent biennials have seen artists tackling head-on this burdensome legacy of violence and racism whose effects still reverberate in contemporary British society.⁷⁷ Reassessing the post-war history of the British Pavilion at the Venice Biennale within a postcolonial context is central to understanding the role of cultural events in shaping the narratives around national identity, an aspect more important than ever in a post-Brexit reality.

75

Simon Faulkner and Anandi Ramamurthy, "Introduction", in Simon Faulkner and Anandi Ramamurthy (eds.), *Visual Culture and Decolonisation in Britain*, (London: Routledge, 2006), 4.

76

Charlotte Higgins, "'So Beautiful I Cried': Rachel Whiteread, Jeremy Deller and More on the Thrill of the Venice Biennale", *The Guardian* (6 May 2019), <https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2019/may/06/so-beautiful-i-cried-rachel-whiteread-jeremy-deller-thrill-venice-biennale-british-pavilion>, accessed July 2023.

77

I am thinking here not only of Chris Ofili's British Pavilion saturated with the colour of the Pan-African flag (2003) or the re-centring of Black female subjectivity in Sonia Boyce's *Feeling Her Way* at the latest Venice Biennale (2022), but also of Richard Hamilton's pavilion (1993) focused on the Troubles, the bloody conflict between Unionists and Irish Nationalists that racked Northern Ireland between the Sixties and the Nineties. For a brilliant read on the multiple ways in which Imperialism still impacts on modern Britain see: Sanghera, Sathnam. *Empireland: How Imperialism Has Shaped Modern Britain* (London: Penguin Books, 2021).

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	Venice Biennale 1948. The <i>Mostra degli Impressionisti</i> at the German Pavilion and its Politics Francesca Castellani Abstract During the 1948 Venice Biennale, the first edition after the end of World War II, the selections for the national pavilions at the Giardini reflected the sclerosis of pre-war structures and the reconfiguration of relationships among post-war victors, defeated nations, and emerging adversaries. This shifting and unstable scenario was epitomised by the <i>Mostra degli Impressionisti</i>, organised by Biennale Secretary Rodolfo Pallucchini and staged in the German Pavilion. This decision takes on deeper resonance when viewed through the lens of the “political topography” of the Giardini’s pavilions. In 1948, defeated Germany, then divided into Allied occupation zones, lacked official representation at the Biennale. Instead, a politically charged exhibition of “the Germans” – featuring artists cleansed of Nazi associations – was displayed in the Italian Pavilion. The choice to occupy the German Pavilion with a “French” exhibition rather than hosting this compensatory display was laden with political and symbolic significance. The tensions, motivations, and consequences of this decision, along with the pavilion’s eventual “restitution” to the Federal Republic of Germany in 1950 against the backdrop of the Cold War, illuminate the Biennale’s evolving post-war role as a platform for soft power. The broader narrative surrounding the organization of these exhibitions – including the dynamics of loans, hesitations from American collectors, contentious negotiations with the Soviet Union, and the lingering shadow of Nazi-looted art – provides a compelling framework for uncovering hidden historical narratives. Keywords Venice Biennale, Impressionism, National Pavilions, History of Exhibitions, Soft Power, Cold War, Rodolfo Pallucchini, Eberhard Hanfstaengl Translation from Italian by Marlene Klein		
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Venice Biennale 1948. The *Mostra degli Impressionisti* at the German Pavilion and its Politics

Francesca Castellani

Prologue: April 2024

Venice, 60. International Art Exhibition, April 17, 2024. On the closed doors of the Israeli Pavilion in the Giardini, guarded by two soldiers, a sign reads: “The artist and curators of the Israeli Pavilion will open the exhibition when a ceasefire and hostage release agreement is reached”.¹ Scattered on the ground, leaflets protesting against “the genocide pavilion” stain the front walkway red. A little further on, one passes the Russian Pavilion, which remained empty in 2022² in protest against the invasion of Ukraine and now hosts the artists representing Bolivia. Walking lost along the frontier of our searing present, these places urge us to remember. The long course of

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“Art needs an open heart, which is something that doesn’t exist right now, so it’s better to stay closed”, explained the two curators of the pavilion, Mira Lapidot and Tamar Margalit, in their statement on April 16, 2024, <https://www.exibart.com/attualita/biennale-di-venezia-il-padiglione-di-israele-rimarra-chiuso>, last accessed April 2024. In the weeks prior to the opening, thousands of operators from the world of art and culture signed a letter urging the Biennale to exclude the Israeli and Iranian pavilions from the event. The Biennale’s official response, issued on February 28, 2024, reads as follows: “With regard to the participation in the International Art Exhibition of the Countries represented in the Pavilions of the Giardini, the Arsenale and in the city of Venice, La Biennale di Venezia would like to specify that all Countries recognised by the Italian Republic may autonomously request to participate officially. Consequently, the Biennale may not take into consideration any petition or call to exclude the participation of Israel or Iran in the coming 60th International Art Exhibition (20 April–24 November 2024)”, <https://www.labiennale.org/en/news/la-biennale-di-venezia-national-participations-and-collateral-events>, last accessed April 2024.

2

The controversy that led to the closure of the Russian Pavilion in 2022 and to the concomitant installation of Piazza Ucraina by Dana Kosmina and the Ukrainian Pavilion curators in the Giardini’s Spazio Esedra, is well known. For the Biennale’s official statement see <https://www.labiennale.org/it/news/la-biennale-di-venezia-presenta-piazza-ucraina-giardini-della-biennale-spazio-esedra>, last accessed December 2022.

history can help us read today's wounds. This is not the first time the Venice Biennale and its pavilion system have mirrored international politics and its conflicts, reflecting a nationalism that has never really died.³

The case study proposed here, the 1948 *Mostra degli Impressionisti* and its politics, is set against the unstable background of yet another crucial Biennale, the 24th International Art Exhibition, held interstitially between two conflicts – World War II and the Cold War. The *Mostra degli Impressionisti* was mounted in the German Pavilion as a form of “moral reparation”⁴ for the wounds Hitler's dictatorship had inflicted on French and Western culture. The circumstances, tensions, and motivations that led to this, and to the Pavilion's “restitution” to the Federal Republic of Germany in the new climate of 1950 marked by the Cold War, offer a starting point for reflecting on the role of the post-World War II Biennale as a terrain for the exercise of soft power and as an attempt to promote political solidarity in defense of democratic ideals.⁵

Venice, 24th International Art Exhibition, July 1948

Writing the preface to the catalog I thought back, ideally, to the conversations we had had during your visit to Venice in '38 when we had seen the storm coming: ten years later I have been able to produce an exhibition in which the principle of freedom of Western European culture is clearly borne out. Let us hope that this freedom can be maintained and other waves of obscurantist dictatorships do not overwhelm our culture, as we already suffered with Nazism.⁶

So wrote Rodolfo Pallucchini, then Secretary General of the Biennale, to his friend and colleague Hans Tietze, who had immigrated to the United States following Nazi persecutions. Despite the calls for peace and the commitment to amending and democratising Pallucchini had imprinted on the Biennale's mission,⁷ the first postwar Biennale would see the Russian Pavilion closed, as in 2022, and a tense climate of confrontation in-between two conflicts – the “hot” one of the World War II and the

3

See Beat Wyss and Jörg Scheller, “Comparative Art History: The Biennale Principle”, in Clarissa Ricci (ed.), *Starting from Venice* (Milan: et al., 2010) 50-61; Angela Vettese, “The National Pavilion at the Venice Biennale as a Form of Public Space”, in Gediminas Urbonas, Ann Lui, and Lucas Freeman (eds.), *Public Space? Lost and Found* (Cambridge MA: SA+P Press MIT School of Architecture and Planning, 2017), 211-21. For a political and identitarian reading of the architectural language of the various pavilions, see Joel Robinson, “Folkloric Modernism. Venice's Giardini della Biennale and the Geopolitics of Architecture”, *Open Arts Journal*, no. 2 (2013–14): 1-24. For an analysis of the current situation (2015–2020) see Melanie Vietmeier, *Biennial as seismograph: Geopolitical factors, funding strategies and potential international collaboration* (Stuttgart: IFA Edition Culture and Foreign Policy, 2022), <https://doi.org/10.17901/akbp1.04.2022>, last accessed December 2022. For the concept of Biennale as an international “platform” see Clarissa Ricci, *La Biennale di Venezia 1993–2003: l'esposizione come piattaforma* (PhD Diss.: Scuola di Studi Avanzati di Venezia – SSAV, Venice 2014).

4

Rodolfo Pallucchini, Secretary General of the Biennale, used this expression in relation to Oskar Kokoschka's exhibition in the Venice Pavilion in his farewell speech for the 1956 Biennale, quoted in Maria Cristina Bandera, “Pallucchini protagonista della Biennale”, *Saggi e memorie di storia dell'arte*, issue dedicated to “Rodolfo Pallucchini e le arti del Novecento”, no. 35 (2011): 77.

5

This research builds on a previous paper by incorporating new archival exploration and focusing on the management of the German Pavilion at the *Mostra* in 1948. See Francesca Castellani, “Il ‘Quarantotto’ degli impressionisti in Biennale: storie, politiche, battaglie”, in Claudio Lorenzini (ed.), *Rodolfo Pallucchini: storie, archivi, prospettive critiche* (Udine: Forum, 2019), 281-296.

6

Pallucchini to Tietze, July 22, 1948: ARPU (Archivio Rodolfo Pallucchini Udine), S. 3, “Documentazione relativa alla Biennale di Venezia”, box 19, “Documentazione dal 1945 al 1962”, folder 4, “Corrispondenza dagli anni 1948-1949,” subfolder “Tietze Hans”. Pallucchini uses the word “exhibition” to describe the Biennale in its entirety.

7

Rodolfo Pallucchini, “Introduzione alla XXIV Biennale”, in *XXIV Biennale di Venezia. Catalogo* (May 1-September 30, 1948), exh. cat., 2nd ed. (Venice: Serenissima, June 1948), XIV–XV: “With this exhibition, the Biennale fulfills its duty to Italian culture and, at the same time, offers an attraction to viewers of every country, [one that is] destined to remain memorable”.

“cold” one with the Soviet Union.⁸ The exhibition engine had started up again in the summer of 1947, a few months after the signing of the Paris Treaties.⁹ In this still relatively fluid phase in the construction of the new European political order, Venice – which was so close to the Free Territory of Trieste and its soon-to-be tragic border – found itself at the epicentre.¹⁰

A not insignificant piece of this mosaic is the *Mostra degli Impressionisti*, which was strongly promoted by Pallucchini with the support of Roberto Longhi, Lionello Venturi, and a committee of impeccable, if not always unanimous, “professors”.¹¹ Although the 1948 Biennale is generally celebrated as an exhibition of reconciliation and cooperation between countries “in a new era of freedom”,¹² this aspect of the discourse only partially reflects the dynamics that were at play. Going beyond the advisory board’s internal disagreements, the entire organisation of the *Mostra degli Impressionisti* was marked by tension, which is far more evident in the documents than in the official publications.¹³ It is no coincidence that the intricate interplay of diplomacy turned out to be even more strategic here than in prior Bien-

8

Adrian Duran, *Painting, Politics, and the New Front of Cold War Italy* (Ashgate: Farnham, 2014) analyses the 1948 and 1950 Biennales ideologically through the lens of the Fronte Nuovo delle Arti. See also Nancy Jachec, “Anti-communism at Home. Europeanism Abroad Italian Cultural Policy at the Venice Biennale, 1948–1958”, *Contemporary European History* 14, no. 2 (2005): 93–217; Nancy Jachec, *Politics and Paintings at the Venice Biennale 1948–1964* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2007). For the 1948 edition, see also Pascale Budillon Puma, *La Biennale di Venezia dalla guerra alla crisi, 1948–1968* (Bari: Palomar, 1995), 30–32; Stefano Collicelli Cagol and Vittoria Martini, “The Venice Biennale in its turning points: 1948 and the aftermath of 1968”, in Noemi de Haro García, Patricia Mayayo, Jesús Carrillo (eds.), *Making Art History in Europe after 1945* (New York: Routledge, 2020), 84–90. On the “Cultural Cold War” in general it is now classic Frances Stonor Saunders, *The Cultural Cold War. The CIA and the World of Arts and Letters* (New York: New Press, 1999); see also Simo Mikkonen and Pekka Suutari (eds.), *Music, Art and Diplomacy. East–West Cultural Interactions and the Cold War* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2016); Patryk Babiracki and Austin Jersild (eds.), *Socialist Internationalism in the Cold War. Exploring the Second World* (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016); Simo Mikkonen, Giles Scott-Smith, and Jari Parkkinen (eds.), *Entangled East and West. Cultural Diplomacy and Artistic Interaction during the Cold War* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2018). Recent studies have overcome the “monolithic” vision of opposition between blocks in favor of a more permeable reality: Jérôme Bazin, Pascal Dubourg Glatigny, and Piotr Piotrowski (eds.), *Art beyond Borders. Artistic Exchange in Communist Europe (1945–1989)* (Budapest–New York: CEU Press, 2016); Beàta Hock and Anu Allas (eds.), *Globalizing East European Art Histories. Past and Present* (New York: Routledge, 2018); Klara Kemp-Welch, *Networking the Bloc. Experimental Art in Eastern Europe, 1965–1981* (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 2018).

9

Pallucchini was “ordered” to the Biennale by the Directorate of Fine Arts of the Municipality of Venice in the summer of 1947: ARPU, S. 3, box 19, folder 4, subfolder “Nicholson Benedict”.

10

The Swiss art historian and collector Hans Hahnloser considers “the closeness of the neighboring Trieste” a deterrent for possible lenders to the *Mostra degli Impressionisti* in Venice. ASAC (Archivio Storico delle Arti Contemporanee, Porto Marghera, Venice), Fondo Storico, Arti Visive, box 3, folder 1. For an introduction to Italy’s postwar conditions, see Silvio Lanaro, *Storia dell’Italia Repubblicana. L’economia, la politica, la cultura, la società dal dopoguerra agli anni ’90* (Venice: Marsilio, 1997).

11

Unlike the organising committees of previous Biennales, the committee for the exhibition on Impressionism was of a high academic caliber, which is why it has been called a “professors” exhibition. In the aftermath of Fascism and the war, the art historians’ alignment on different political and ideological fronts remained latent but concrete and reflected different conceptions of Impressionism and its “modernism”. On the reception of Impressionism in Italy before World War II and its paradoxes, see Laura Moure Cecchini, “Imitators of the Imitators? World Impressionisms at the Venice Biennale, 1895–1948”, in Alexis Clark and Frances Fowle (eds.), *Globalizing Impressionism: Reception, Translation, and Transnationalism* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2020). The literature has tended to crystallise the conflict between Roberto Longhi and Lionello Venturi, an authentic international expert of the movement who remained lukewarm about the exhibition. Maria Cristina Bandera reconstructs the polemic in “Pallucchini protagonista della Biennale”: 75–92; Maria Cristina Bandera (ed.), *Il carteggio Longhi-Pallucchini. Le prime Biennali del dopoguerra, 1948–1956* (Milan: Charta, 1999); Maria Cristina Bandera, “Pallucchini segretario della Biennale e il suo carteggio con Longhi”, in *Una vita per l’arte veneta*, Quaderni di «Arte Documento», 2001: 128–49; Collicelli Cagol and Martini, *The Venice Biennale in its turning points*, 89–90; Castellani, “Il ‘Quarantotto’ degli impressionisti in Biennale”. On Pallucchini as a critic of Impressionism, see also Giuliana Tomasella, *Rodolfo Pallucchini. Scritti sull’arte contemporanea* (Venice–Verona: Fondazione Cini-Scripta, 2011), 37–39. On the role of Lionello Venturi in postwar Biennales, Letizia Giardini recently presented “Lionello Venturi and the International Art Exhibition of La Biennale di Venezia: Postwar Developments”, conference *Lionello Venturi and Postwar Art* (MLAC – Museo Laboratorio Arte Contemporanea, Palazzo del Rettorato, Sapienza University of Rome, November 10, 2023).

12

Pallucchini, “Introduzione alla XXIV Biennale”, XI.

13

The main archival reservoir is the Biennale’s own archives, ASAC.

nales, helping, for example, to obtain loans from French public museums or to get artworks released from the allied-occupied areas on German soil.¹⁴

A Pavilion Without a Nation

The scenario summoned up by the *Mostra degli Impressionisti* allowed for the shadows of the ongoing historical turmoil to filter through. Even if the decision to mount the exhibition in the German Pavilion was made at a later date, and even if it was partially dictated by pragmatic considerations – given the building’s excellent state of conservation in comparison to other possible venues¹⁵ – it can be seen in a new light when read within the “political topography” of the Giardini’s pavilions, which is anything but abandoned even today.

Defeated Germany lacked an official national representation at the 24th Biennale. In that crucial 1948, Germany – with the Berlin Blockade at its doorstep – did not even exist as a nation, divided as it was into four areas governed by the forces of occupation. This status is reflected in the difficulty the Biennale administration faced in identifying appropriate institutional contacts among the various military authorities and in its attempts to facilitate the shipment of loaned artworks in and out of German territory.¹⁶ The ASAC archives contain a vast and at times frantic exchange of letters and telegrams, dating back to the winter and the spring of 1947-48, addressed to the head of the Italian Delegation in Frankfurt, Lieutenant Colonel Vitale G. Gallina.¹⁷

14

For the specific relations between Italy and France during the 1948 Biennale see Caroline Pane, “La Biennale di Venezia del 1948. Rappresentazioni italo-francesi e poste in gioco politiche all’indomani della seconda guerra mondiale”, in Maria Pia Casalea (ed.), *Luoghi d’Europa. Culti, città, economie* (Bologna: Archetipo, 2012), 130-37; Marylène Malbert, *Les relations artistiques internationales à la Biennale de Venise 1948-1968* (PhD Diss.: Université Paris I- Panthéon Sorbonne, Paris 2006); Marylène Malbert, “De l’utilité de l’Ecole de Paris pour relancer la Biennale de Venise en 1948”, *Studiolo*, no. 7 (2009): 213-234. The exhibition’s diplomatic weight within a new strategic framework of alliances can also be felt in the documents’ insistence on the brotherhood between the two countries in the aftermath of the war, while the honorary committee is a small masterpiece of institutional architecture (ASAC, Fondo Storico, Arti Visive, box 1, “1948. Mostre storiche. Gli impressionisti francesi”, folder 3). On the theme of diplomacy of the arts within the international exhibition system see Rika Devos and Alexander Ortenberg (eds.), *Architecture of Great Expositions 1937–1959. Messages of Peace, Images of War* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2015).

15

The initial idea was to hold the exhibition at the Italian Pavilion (now the Central Pavilion), a space Pallucchini criticises. He is the one who proposes the German Pavilion. In a letter to Longhi dated February 17, 1948, Ponti refers to Pallucchini’s motivations: the limited amount of space available in the Italian Pavilion, the artists’ opposition, better conditions in the German Pavilion, and the proximity to the French Pavilion (quoted in Bandera, *Il carteggio Longhi-Pallucchini*, 70).

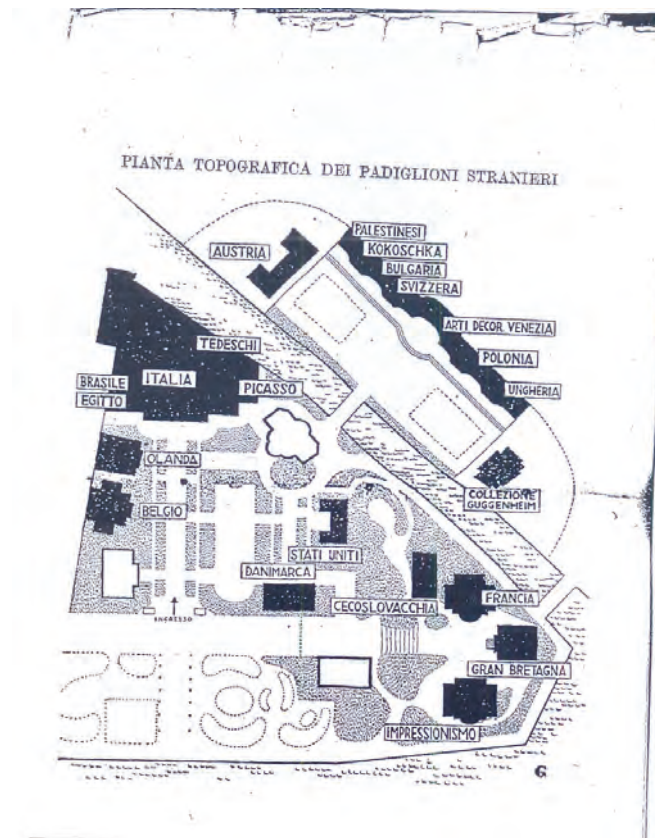
16

From the initial contacts with the Italian Representation, the first lists of loans from the German museums included a good twelve works (Letter of December 10, 1947: ASAC, Fondo Storico, Arti Visive, box 3, folder 3: “Germania”, loose papers). Negotiations proved to be particularly complicated for three very famous paintings: Gauguin’s *Riders on the Beach* (1902) and *Barbarian Tales* (1902), and Renoir’s *Alfred Sisley with His Wife* (1868), conserved at Museum Folkwang in Essen and at the Wallraf-Richartz Museum in Cologne, both cities then under British control, with particular concern for civil liberties (Letter of February 5, 1948; *ibid*).

17

ASAC, Fondo Storico, Arti Visive, box 3, folder 3: “Germania”, loose papers. Ultimately, a contest between nations would unblock the situation: the Belgian government provided a train, the United States a airplane.

fig. 1
Topographic map of the 24th
Biennale, from *XXIV Biennale
di Venezia. Catalogo*, 2nd ed.
(Venice: Serenissima, 1948)



Although there was no official participation, the Biennale would host an exhibition of contemporary German artists, titled *Artisti Tedeschi*. Contrary to what one might expect, the exhibition was held in the Italian rather than the German Pavilion.¹⁸ The reasons for this migration from one pavilion to another, which effectively deprived Germany of its institutional space and effaced its name, still need to be more thoroughly questioned.

In a climate in which no choice, no expression, is neutral, fair words bear weight. The use of official terms reflects the desire to create distance from what the Nazi state and its pavilion had previously represented. The title of the exhibition does not refer to Germany, but to the “Tedeschi” – the Germans, a people, rather than a nation.¹⁹ The meaning seems clear. In a scenario that still wavered between inescapable condemnation and the need to open a dialogue for new alliances, it was impossible to forget the horrors of Nazi Germany – the subsequent Nuremberg trials were still underway – but there was a growing distinction between the power of the state and the responsibility of individuals, reaching out to those who were now threatened by the new, terrible form of communist totalitarianism.

18

The building had just been renamed Palazzo Centrale (Central Pavilion) but, in the correspondence, it is always referred to as the Italian Pavilion. The *Artisti Tedeschi* exhibition occupies room 51, which is not just any room in that it is immediately preceded by the two rooms showing Picasso, an artist himself at the centre of a controversial case of cultural diplomacy. Given his communist sympathies, France opposed hosting him in its own pavilion, as Pallucchini initially requested. Pane, “La Biennale di Venezia del 1948”, 137; Annie Cohen-Solal, *Un étranger nommé Picasso: Dossier de police n° 74.664* (Paris: Fayard, 2021). For the German participants, see Christoph Becker and Annette Lagler (eds.), *Biennale Venedig: Der Deutsche Beitrag, 1895–1995* (Ostfildern: Cantz, 1995), and especially for the years under consideration here, see Peter Joch, “Die Ära der Retrospektiven 1948 bis 1962. Wiedergutmachung, Rekonstruktion und Archäologie des Progressiven”, 35–50; eng ed. Elke aus dem Moore and Ursula Zeller (eds.), *Germany's Contributions to the Venice Biennale 1895–2007* (Cologne: DuMont, 2003); Jan Andreas May and Sabine Meine (eds.), *Der deutsche Pavillon. Ein Jahrhundert nationaler Repräsentation auf der Internationalen Kunstausstellung “La Biennale di Venezia” 1912–2012* (Regensburg: Schnell & Steiner, 2015). On German participants in Biennale first period see also Barbara Cinelli, “Prima e dopo l'espressionismo: presenze della pittura tedesca alle Biennali di Venezia dal 1889 al 1928”, in Maria Grazia Messina and Dominique Jarrassé (eds.), *L'expressionnisme: une construction de l'autre* (Paris: Editions Esthétiques du Divers, 2012).

19

See the way-finding map in the official catalogue.

What was played out around the German Pavilion was a sort of battle fought with titles, words, and spaces.²⁰ Though this battle was partially submerged, the documents conserved in the ASAC archives provide some interesting background. To sugarcoat the pill of being from their own national pavilion, the Biennale management resorted to some creative storytelling. In a letter dated November 20, 1947, the Special Commissioner Giovanni Ponti wrote to the Ministry of Education of the Bavarian Government, which, as we will see, was the first contact point for the exhibition of German contemporary artists, stating:

Given that not all the nations that have a pavilion at the Biennale will be able to participate in the exhibition on their own premises because of the restoration those buildings require, and furthermore an organization involving the opening of all the pavilions would require [...] a sum of expenses excessive for our current budget, we thought that, with the consent of the participating Nations, we could adopt a suitable, immediate solution by offering hospitality to various countries in the Italian Pavilion itself.²¹

At the time it was made, it was a sincere and undoubtedly flawless offer, and would have stayed as such had events not later taken different turn, with the allied forces – Great Britain, France, United States – aligned in their own pavilion.²² In reality, the excuse of precarious conservation did not apply to the German Pavilion. Pallucchini actually defined it as “the most beautiful and the most modern of the Biennale pavilions”,²³ showing himself all too willing to pay the limited restoration costs when it came to mounting the *Mostra degli Impressionisti* there.²⁴ Moreover, one should not forget that the entire *facies* of the building, renovated by Ernst Haiger in 1937 to respond to the image of “muscular” power and classicism of Hitler’s Germany, bore the painful stigma of Nazi ideology imprinted in its forms.²⁵

This choice to banish the group show *Artisti Tedeschi* from the German Pavilion and to use the space for a quintessentially “French” retrospective seems to carry a clear political and symbolic message.²⁶ Though the early Biennales had favoured a view of Impressionism as a cosmopolitan and essentially transna-

20

It is worth remembering that the naming of the pavilions in Venice is anything but secondary. Another example is provided by the German Pavilion, when in 1984, the inscription “Bundesrepublik Deutschland – Federal Republic of Germany” was added to the facade to distinguish it from the German Democratic Republic which had been participating in the Biennale since 1982 (see Michael Diers, “Germania a margine. The German Pavillion in Venice and the Interventions of Art – An Historical Survey”, in Aus dem Moore and Zeller (eds.), *Germany’s Contributions to the Venice Biennale 1895–2007*, 36). Conversely, the inscription was dismantled after the reunification of the two countries.

21

ASAC, Fondo Storico, Scatole Nere, Paesi, box 13: “Germania, 1938–1952”, folder “Artisti tedeschi”. A similar letter was actually sent to the USSR, a delegation whose inclusion was also controversial at that time. For this, see Matteo Bertelé, *Arte sovietica alla Biennale di Venezia (1924–1962)* (Milan: Mimesis, 2020).

22

Austria, Belgium, Bulgaria, Czechoslovakia, Denmark, Holland, Poland, and Switzerland also exhibited in their national pavilions, while Hungary was hosted in the Romanian Pavilion, and Brazil and Egypt in the Central Pavilion. See Jan Andreas May, *La Biennale di Venezia: Kontinuität und Wandel in der venezianischen Ausstellungspolitik 1895–1948* (Berlin: Akademie Verlag, 2009); Chiara Di Stefano, “Beyond Ideologies: United States Exhibition Strategies at the Venice Biennale from 1948 to 1958”, *The Journal of Modern Art History Department Faculty of Philosophy University of Belgrade*, no. 12 (2016): 229–37.

23

So, Pallucchini writes to the collector Germain Seligmann to persuade him to lend one of his Degas’s, February 18, 1948: ASAC, Fondo Storico, Arti Visive, box 3, folder 6.

24

See an undated note by Pallucchini relating to the work to be carried out in the German Pavilion: ASAC, Fondo Storico, Scatole Nere, Paesi, box 13: “Germania, 1938–1952”, folder “Artisti tedeschi”, loose papers.

25

Annette Lagler, “The German Pavillon”, in Aus dem Moore and Zeller (eds.), *Germany’s Contributions to the Venice Biennale 1895–2007*, 55–61.

26

The practice of “political expropriation” of national spaces in the Biennale was not new. In 1942, the French, American, and British pavilions had been taken over by the regime to host exhibitions of Fascist propaganda (Bertelé, *Arte sovietica alla Biennale di Venezia*, chap. III, paragraph 1).

tional language,²⁷ from 1932 on, when the mood was fully “back to order”, the interpretation moved toward a more identitarian direction. Accordingly, commissioner of the French Pavilion, Louis Hautecoeur, consolidated a celebratory and “classical” interpretation of Impressionism as the foundation of the modern tradition through four programmatic exhibitions devoted to the movement’s “founders”: Monet (1932), Manet (1934), the “Italian” Degas (1936), and Renoir (1938).²⁸ This is not surprising as, in 1933, the relevant entry in the Treccani Encyclopedia – the most authoritative and ambitious cultural enterprise born under Fascism – demonstrated: “Impressionism was and remained an essentially French movement”.²⁹ This statement, made by Palma Bucarelli, future director of the National Gallery of Modern Art in Rome, shows the degree to which Lionello Venturi’s critical positions had penetrated the generation of young scholars destined for the cultural reconstruction of postwar Italy, despite the restrictions imposed by the regime and his exile.³⁰ Lionello Ventu-

27

A synthesis in Moure Cecchini, “Imitators of the Imitators?”. On the critical perspective that leads Impressionism back to a fluid international dimension, typical of the early stages of its diffusion at the end of the 19th century, see also Alexis Clark and Frances Fowle (eds.), *Globalizing Impressionism: Reception, Translation, and Transnationalism* (New Haven NJ: Yale University Press, 2020); Emily C. Burns and Alice M. Rudy Price (eds.), *Mapping Impressionist Painting in Transnational Contexts* (New York and London: Routledge, 2021); *Workshopping Future Directions in Impressionism*, conference, September 5-6, 9, 2024 (London: Institute of Advanced Studies, University College). Peter Joch underlines the continuity in the Biennale’s interpretation of Impressionism as “a familiar symbol of international understanding”, in 1948 as well (Joch, “Die Ära der Retrospektiven 1948 bis 1962”, 90); in a similar vein, see Bertelé, *Arte sovietica alla Biennale di Venezia*, chap. III, paragraph 2. My interpretation diverges in favour of a more careful reframing of French Impressionism in the context of the Biennales since the 1930s. On the *vexata quaestio* of the meager presence of the Impressionists at the early Biennales – a controversy begun, as we know, by Ardengo Soffici in *La Voce* in 1908 – see Maria Mimita Lamberti, “Vittorio Pica e l’impressionismo in Italia”. *Annali della Scuola Normale Superiore di Pisa: Classe di Lettere e Filosofia*, III, V, no. 3, (1975): 1149-1201; Maria Mimita Lamberti, “Appunti sulle sezioni straniere alle prime Biennali”, *L’uomo nero*, I, no. 2 (2004): 257-63; Leo Lecci, “Monet alle prime Biennali di Venezia: Note sulla fortuna critica dell’artista in Italia”, in Silvia Alborn (ed.), *Claude Monet a Bordighera* (Milan: Leonardo, 1998), 116-19; Leo Lecci, “Occasioni mancate alla Biennale: Presenza e assenza di Monet, Degas e Renoir alle mostre di Venezia dal 1895 al 1901”, in Leo Lecci and Paola Valenti (eds.), *Studi di storia dell’arte in ricordo di Franco Sborgi* (Genova: De Ferrari, 2018), 299-327.

28

Hautecoeur’s declaration in the presentation of the Degas exhibition is also programmatic: “French art, like France itself, is at the same time bold in spirit, but respectful of the traditions of its works” (Louis Hautecoeur, “Padiglione della Francia” in *XX Esposizione biennale internazionale d’arte. Catalogo*, exh. cat. (Venice: Premiate Officine Grafiche Carlo Ferrari, 1936), 258; here quoted from Chiara Di Stefano, “L’allestimento museale nell’epoca della sua riproducibilità virtuale: il caso della mostra di Renoir alla Biennale veneziana del 1938”, in Francesca Castellani, Francesca Gallo, Vania Stuckelj, Francesca Zanella, Stefania Zuliani (eds.), *Esposizioni / Exhibitions*, International conference proceedings (Parma: CSAC, January 27–28, 2017), *Ricerche di s/confine*, Dossier 4 (2018): 375. On the Impressionist paintings exhibited at the Biennales of the 1930s, see the database <https://digitalimpressionismproject.omeka.net/>, last accessed August 2024. On the curatorial approach of the French pavilion under Hautecoeur and before, as an exercise of “soft power” and an affirmation of a cultural identity through the historiographical exhibition construction of a “Mediterranean tradition” and a “new classicism” of modernity, see Margot Degoutte, *La France à Venise. Entre modernités et traditions, participation et représentation françaises à la Biennale de Venise, 1895–1940*, (Diss.: École nationale des Chartes, 2014); Margot Degoutte, “Fare la storia delle esposizioni per fare un’altra storia dell’arte. Elementi di ricerca attraverso l’esempio della Francia alla Biennale di Venezia nella prima metà del XX secolo”, in Castellani, Gallo, Stuckelj, Zanella, Zuliani (eds.), *Esposizioni / Exhibitions*, 280-88; Margot Degoutte, *La France à la Biennale de Venise, 1895–1940. Etude historique et artistique* (PhD Diss.: Université Paris Nanterre, 2019), vols. 1-3. A paradoxically identitarian reading of Impressionism in a local and Venetian sense is offered by Pallucchini himself, who, in the French movement, sees an heir of touch painting and the Venetian “fa presto”, continuing the line of thought of his master Giuseppe Fiocco (Tomasella, *Rodolfo Pallucchini. Scritti sull’arte contemporanea*, 17).

29

See Moure Cecchini, “Imitators of the Imitators?”. The Treccani Encyclopedia’s entry was signed jointly by Giorgio Castelfranco and Palma Bucarelli, who in the introduction to the section “Impressionism outside of France”, felt the need to clarify the French identity of the movement. As Moure Cecchini has noted, since the 1910s, this identification of Impressionism “as a French” movement had been the occasion, over time, of repeated political misfortunes: on the eve of the First World War, for example, or in the last years of the Fascist regime, after 1937, as well as in the Stalinist USSR.

30

As well known, Venturi was forced first to flee to Paris, in 1932, after having refused the oath of allegiance to Fascism which was mandatory for teaching at the university, and later to the United States. On this not so well-known stain on the regime, see Giorgio Boatti, *Preferirei di no. Le storie dei dodici professori che si opposero a Mussolini* (Turin: Einaudi, 2017).

ri had promoted a modernist view of Impressionism since his teaching days at the University of Turin. His writings from his Parisian and American exile helped to reinforce a political and forward-looking interpretation of the artistic movement as a symbol of the battle for cultural freedom.³¹ This, in any case, is compatible with Pallucchini's vision for the 1948 Biennale, which promised to concentrate on "those great artists who have defended, in sad moments, the freedom of European Western civilisation".³²

To this "political" inclination toward Impressionism as an exercise in "soft power" – which also justifies its anachronism within a contemporary art show – we have to add another, dramatic piece of the historical mosaic that contributes to constructing its moral and psychological background: the systematic criminal looting of Impressionist works of art France suffered during the Nazi occupation. Albeit partially ignored and silenced, it is a searing theme that we will return to shortly.

It seems legitimate to hypothesise the exercise of a retribution of sorts in the pavilions' use of these works. The positions are reversed: the era's victims now occupy the invaders' spaces. Then again, topography is never neutral, especially at the Biennale, which, since 1914, has staged an irrefutable show of cultural power in the Giardini. The main visual axis, which culminates in what was then the Italian Pavilion, is intersected by another axis on the dominant, slightly elevated ground of the Motta, at the vertex of which the trinity of Great Britain, France, and Germany maps old hierarchies and new caesuras in history.³³ The French and German pavilions face one another. From a curatorial perspective, their proximity clearly guarantees a conceptual continuity with the palimpsest of the 1948 exhibition, underscoring the coherence of the "modern tradition" that considers Impressionism a direct precursor to French avant-gardes, from Matisse to Braque, an ideology that, as previously discussed, had been in the works in France for some time.³⁴ Yet in emphasising "the spiritual unity and the legacy of the Impressionists [in] contemporary French work", the words used in the Biennale catalogue³⁵ actually underscored, in contrast, the disaggregation of German identity, deprived of its space and its name.

31

Venturi's interest in Impressionism was consolidated during his exile in Paris, starting from the important essay published in *L'Arte* in 1935 (XXXVIII, II: 118–49) up to the historiographical setup of the *Archives de l'Impressionnisme* (Paris and New York: Durand-Ruel, 1939). See Laura Iamurri, "Lionello Venturi e la storia dell'Impressionismo, 1932–1939", *Studiolo*, Dossier 5 (2007): 74–90; Laura Iamurri, *Lionello Venturi e la modernità dell'impressionismo* (Macerata: Quodlibet, 2011). Venturi's modernist positions would find new impetus during and after his stay in the USA, where he emigrated in 1939: see "The Aesthetic Idea of Impressionism", *The Journal of Aesthetics and Criticism*, 1 (1941): 34–35; "L'impressionismo e le origini dell'arte astratta moderna", *Quaderni di San Giorgio*, 2 (1956): 77–80.

32

Pallucchini, "Introduzione alla XXIV Biennale", XV. A partially different reading can be found in Joch, "Die Ära der Retrospektiven 1948 bis 1962", 90.

33

Although the article refers to another context, interesting insights into a possible "political-cultural topography" can be found in Danilo Udovički-Selj, "Facing Hitler's Pavilion: The Uses of Modernity in the Soviet Pavilion at the 1937 Paris International Exhibition", *Journal of Contemporary History*, 47, no. 1 (2012): 13–47; Devos, Ortenberg and Paperny (eds.), *Architecture of Great Expositions 1937–1959*.

34

On the role of Impressionism in constructing a new French "modern classicism", see also Giuliana Tomasella, "'Classicità' dell'Impressionismo nel dibattito critico novecentesco", in Jacopo Bonetto, Maria Stella Busana, Andrea Raffaele Ghiotto (eds.), *I mille volti del passato. Scritti in onore di Francesca Ghedini* (Rome: Quasar, 2016), 341–47.

35

Ponti to Longhi, February 17, 1948. Quoted in Bandera, *Il carteggio Longhi–Pallucchini*, 70.

“Bavarians” or “Germans”?

Sotto voce the archives recount other plots in the interwoven story of the *Mostra degli Impressionisti* and the *Artisti Tedeschi*. At its inception, the latter was only supposed to showcase a selection of “living artists from Munich”³⁶: almost a return to the origins, given that the first German pavilion at the Biennale was the Bavarian Pavilion inaugurated in 1909.³⁷ In 1948, however, Munich had taken on an identity that oscillated between its progressive past (the city of the Secession and Der Blaue Reiter) and the recent but unwieldy shadows of the *Degenerate Art Exhibition* and the worst cultural manifestations of the Nazi regime. It is therefore not without a certain embarrassment that Pallucchini made an eleventh-hour appeal to Colonel Gallina, the Italian representative of the occupying forces, to increase the number of loaned works according to the first idea:

This Presidency would also like the Biennale to be able to show artists from Frankfurt and other German localities, whose works could be grouped together in another room. I thus appeal to your kindness so that you might spark the interest of competent circles.³⁸

The “exhibition of Bavarian artists” (as it is referred to in the majority of documents) did not become the exhibition of *Artisti Tedeschi* until just before the Biennale opened.³⁹ The reason for this initial, surprising, cultural orientation is soon explained and reveals a degree of opportunism. Scrutinising the papers conserved at the ASAC, it appears that the interest in Munich and in the initial idea for a show of contemporary Bavarian painting was to some extent instrumental in organising the retrospective on Impressionism, which Pallucchini clearly had at heart. The Bayerische Staatsgemäldesammlungen (Bavarian State Painting Collections) in Munich owned several important pieces of art including Manet’s *Luncheon in the Studio* (1868) and *Claude Monet Painting in his Studio-Boat* (1874), which is why Pallucchini had initially contacted Eberhard Hanfstaengl, the director of the Munich Museum, who later became the curator of the exhibition of the *Artisti Tedeschi* at the Biennale.⁴⁰ A letter dated November 20, 1947, addressed to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in Rome, to request their support in obtaining loans clarifies this situation.

36

Eberhard Hanfstaengl to Pallucchini, November 14, 1947 (ASAC, Fondo Storico, Scatole Nere, Paesi, box. 13: “Germania, 1938–1952”, folder “Artisti tedeschi”, loose papers).

37

See Christoph Becker, “The Venice Biennale and Germany’s Contributions from 1895 to 1942”, in Aus dem Moore and Zeller (eds.), *Germany’s Contributions to the Venice Biennale 1895–2007*, 70.

38

March 6, 1948: ASAC, Fondo Storico, Scatole Nere, Paesi, box 13: “Germania, 1938–1952”, folder “Artisti tedeschi”, loose papers. In the end, as evidenced in the list of artists in the catalogue, the shortlist was lengthened notably to include twenty-eight artists from both the north and the south, among whom were important exponents of expressionism, such as Otto Dix, Erich Heckel, and Max Pechstein: *XXIV Biennale di Venezia. Catalogo*, 189–93; Joch, “Die Ära der Retrospektiven 1948 bis 1962”, 35–50. In this context, one should recall the *First General German Art Exhibition* in Dresden in 1946.

39

April 29, 1949. In a letter to the General Secretariat of the Deutscher Künstlerbund, the German artist’s association of Munich, Pallucchini speaks of “a show of contemporary German painting, through the works of those artists that represent the most significant trends of the democratic Germany” (ASAC, Fondo Storico, Scatole Nere, Paesi, box 13: “Germania, 1938–1952”, folder “Artisti tedeschi”, loose papers) and seems to delegate their selection entirely to the Association.

40

October 22, 1947: ASAC, Fondo Storico, Scatole Nere, Paesi, box 13: “Germania, 1938–1952”, folder “Artisti tedeschi”, loose papers). A designation that is in some respects surprising given that Hanfstaengl had been commissioner of the German Pavilion in 1934 and 1936, at the beginning of the Nazi era: a position that was nonetheless confirmed until 1958. On Eberhard Hanfstaengl, see Eberhard Ruhmer (ed.), *Eberhard Hanfstaengl zum 25. Geburtstag* (Munich: Bruckmann, 1961); Becker, “The Venice Biennale and Germany’s Contributions from 1895 to 1942”, 80–83; Joch, “Die Ära der Retrospektiven 1948 bis 1962”, 90–101; Jan Andreas May, “Eberhard Hanfstaengl als deutscher Kommissar auf der Biennale von Venedig 1934 und 1936”, in May and Meine (eds.), *Der deutsche Pavillon*, 85–100.

We mentioned the desire for a representation of Bavarian artists to be present at the next Biennale with some of the most significant recent work. In this regard, we would like to point out to this Hon. Ministry how, in addition to being desired, this participation also appears in some way opportune; if Bavaria contributes to the construction of our Exhibition of French Impressionism with works of great interest; we would reserve a room for the Bavarian artists for such a participation.⁴¹

In concrete terms, five impressionist paintings – including Cézanne’s famous *Self-Portrait*⁴² – in exchange for twenty-five contemporary painters.⁴³ It was a *do ut des* that might seem brutal but is actually standard backstage practice in the international exhibition circuit.⁴⁴

Naturally, these pragmatic aspects appear only sporadically in the official correspondence, which underlines the moral significance of the German (or ex-Bavarian) presence in the first postwar Biennale, an exhibition of “moral reparation”⁴⁵ showing artists who were purged by the Nazis.⁴⁶ These backstage tones are politically interesting and reveal a certain affinity between two countries that are having a hard time juggling between inevitable references to an uncomfortable and somehow shared past. A missive from Pallucchini to Hanfstaengl stated that:

The French Impressionists at the Munich Gallery represent one of the gestures most worthy of being remembered of the freedom of your nineteenth-century artistic cultures. Just as we are only now able to organise an exhibition of French Impressionism, which fascistic [sic] nationalism would not have allowed. In addition to being a grand gesture of solidarity between our two free peoples, bringing the Munich Gallery’s French Impressionists to Venice means reclaiming one of the merits of your artistic culture.⁴⁷

The evident desire to highlight a moment in German history that was particularly open to cultural and international dialogue, namely the early collecting of Impressionist painters in the late 19th century, strongly, albeit with a certain dose of artifice, underscores the distance between the “two free peoples” and the dictatorships they seem to have endured rather than supported. Pallucchini uses the word “people”

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ASAC, Fondo Storico, Scatole Nere, Paesi, box 13: “Germania, 1938-1952”, folder “Artisti tedeschi”, loose papers.

42

Pallucchini to the Consul General Pietro Orlandini, April 28, 1948: ASAC, Fondo Storico, Scatole Nere, Paesi, box 13: “Germania, 1938-1952”, folder “Artisti tedeschi”, loose papers.

43

Pallucchini’s loan requests were much more ambitious, but the dates of the Venetian exhibition conflicted with shows in Brussels and Amsterdam, to which the Bavarian Museum had already promised certain works.

44

For the *Mostra degli Impressionisti*, for example, the French wanted to host an exhibition of the Italian primitives in return. See the letter from the Italian Embassy in Paris dated November 20, 1947 and signed by Pietro Quaroni: “Here, however, we would like, in return (which I have the impression will be set forth as a *sine qua non*), an exhibition of at least thirty masterpieces of the Italian primitives to be organised in Paris, as well, in the coming year”. (ASAC, Fondo Storico, Arti Visive, box 1, “1948. Mostre storiche. Gli impressionisti francesi”, folder 3, loose papers). The 1948 Biennale marks a more relaxed climate in relations between France and Italy than, for example, the first postwar Film Festival in 1946: Gian Piero Brunetta, *La Mostra Internazionale d’Arte Cinematografica di Venezia 1932–2022* (Venice: Marsilio Editori and Biennale di Venezia, 2022).

45

Pallucchini uses these terms for the Oskar Kokoska exhibition in the 1948 Biennale, in a case of Nazi purge. He does so in his farewell speech from the 1956 Biennale. Bandera, “Pallucchini protagonista della Biennale”, 77.

46

Joch, “Die Ära der Retrospektiven 1948 bis 1962”, 91.

47

A minute undated letter, thought to have been composed at the beginning of November 1947 (ASAC, Fondo Storico, Scatole Nere, Paesi, box 13: “Germania, 1938-1952”, folder “Artisti tedeschi”, loose papers). Pallucchini is evidently thinking of the German markets’ and collectors’ precocious openness towards Impressionism.

in the place of “nation”, while Hanfstaengl, who at the time had no nation behind him, tries to walk the shaky tightrope of the Venice–Munich axis: “You suggest a very vital link between our two Countries and especially between our two Cities”.⁴⁸ The two men were operating in a minefield on which Hanfstaengl’s position, in and of itself compromising, necessitated a certain caution. We know that the German scholar had been the commissioner of the German pavilion in 1934 and 1936 at the beginning of the Nazi era: a period for which there was both interest and a need to forget.⁴⁹ Yet despite this awkward past, Hanfstaengl remained the commissioner of the German Pavilion until the 1958 Biennale, contributing greatly to the cultural identity of the new Federal Republic of Germany as a legitimate heir of the avant-garde movements of the early 20th century, on a par with other European nations. The “cathartic” expressions used by the curator in the 1948 catalogue move further in this direction: “May this exhibition show that German artists and their significant personalities can also make a contribution to the ongoing reconstruction of the cultural world of old Europe”.⁵⁰

The 1950 “Return Home”

In 1950, there were still conflicts over the use of the German Pavilion. The Italian scholar Pallucchini wanted to repeat the *atout* of 1948 and use the space for an exhibition managed directly by the Biennale. In contrast, its German curator was determined to reclaim control of the pavilion as a space for national representation. Pallucchini, meanwhile, had initially planned to use one room of the pavilion for a Kandinsky retrospective, which he had already agreed upon with the painter’s wife.⁵¹ In Pallucchini’s eyes, this evidently extraterritorial presence was justified by its continuity with *Der Blaue Reiter* exhibition, which, along with the shows of Ernst Barlach, Karl Hofer, Emil Nolde, and Max Beckmann, was the spearhead of the German participation in the 25th International Art Exhibition.⁵² All these exhibitions had been chosen by the Secretary General of the Biennale, as he was the one who had suggested the names to Hanfstaengl even before the latter’s official appointment as head of the pavilion.⁵³ In October 1949, Pallucchini goes as far as to suggest a

48

November 14, 1947: ASAC, Fondo Storico, Scatole Nere, Paesi, box 13: “Germania, 1938-1952”, folder “Artisti tedeschi”, loose papers. The letter was written in German. Here quoted from the Italian translation of the original text, which was done for Pallucchini and is conserved in the archives.

49

Despite the propaganda dictate of the Nazi regime, studies recognise Hanfstaengl as partially independent from the cultural orientation of Alfred Rosenberg, the notorious ideologist of Nazism, with moderate openings to modernism. See, for example, the presence (albeit exploited) of the *Neue Sachlichkeit* and Ernst Barlach at the 1934 Biennale. Not surprisingly, in 1937, Hanfstaengl was replaced with Adolf Ziegler, who was very loyal to the Nazi creed. Becker, “The Venice Biennale and Germany’s Contributions from 1895 to 1942”, 80-84.

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Eberhard Hanfstaengl, “Artisti tedeschi”, in *XXIV Biennale di Venezia*, 189. The text is cited directly from Peter Joch’s translation. The scholar underscores Hanfstaengl’s need to claim an alternative German tradition to Nazi art: hence his policy of “cathartic retrospectives” on eminent figures of “Modernism” as a construction of the new Federal Republic of Germany. See Joch, “Die Ära der Retrospektiven 1948 bis 1962”, 89 and 91.

51

Pallucchini mentions Kandinsky in his first informal contact with Hanfstaengl in September.

52

Joch, “Die Ära der Retrospektiven 1948 bis 1962”, 35-50.

53

Pallucchini writes to the German scholar “outside of and before the official roles”: September 24, 1949: ASAC, Fondo Storico, Scatole Nere, Paesi, box 13: “Germania, 1938-1952”, folder “Artisti tedeschi”, loose papers. The letter clearly underscores Pallucchini’s hand in the choices for the German Pavilion at the 25th Biennale. The new Federal Republic of Germany was actually formed that September of 1949 and had not as yet established a stable central governing structure. The complexity of this situation is reflected – as in 1948 – in the difficulty of identifying suitable institutional interlocutors between Bonn and the Italian delegation in Frankfurt. This is how the situation is described by Edouard Trier, editor in chief of *Il Cicerone* review in Cologne, whom Pallucchini had asked for support: “The difficult principle on the German side lies in the fact that Western Germany does not have a Federal Ministry of Cult [sic], but just professional ministers in the single Regions of the Federation”. January 31, 1950: ASAC, Fondo Storico, Scatole Nere, Paesi, box 13: “Germania, 1938-1952”, folder “Artisti tedeschi”, loose papers.

room-by-room layout of the German Pavilion, essentially taking over the curator's role.⁵⁴ Masked as simple "recommendations", the letter expresses a real programme yet, above all, throws a retrospective light on the 1948 exhibition layouts:

First of all I must absolutely reassure you that the German Pavilion is now completely available to your artists. For the past Biennale, inasmuch as it was a sequestered asset and given that the German participation was restricted to a limited number of works whose placement did not require more than one room; considering also that the building was in need of costly restructuring after its lengthy disuse, and, especially, the consequences of war, the idea of mounting the exhibition of French Impressionism in that building was an excellent pretext to be able to make the necessary repairs under the auspices of this institution and therein to bring the pavilion back to a perfect state of efficiency. But now, with cultural exchanges getting better and better and glad that the new Germany, with its best artists, can return to the beautiful venue created in the exhibition grounds, the pavilion – as I confirm – is at your complete disposal. [...] This Kandinsky exhibition has already been planned by the Biennale's Figurative Arts Commission, which would take care of the entire organization, thus all of the expenses would be borne by our Institution; You only need to grant use of the room to host it, accepting the exhibition in your pavilion.⁵⁵

Hanfstaengl's response is polite but firm:

I understand [...] that You intend to mount the Kandinsky exhibition in the German pavilion. Will You allow me, Professor, to express my opinion, that Kandinsky – in his overall production – cannot be well accommodated under the German flag? I think it would be better that Kandinsky, like Picasso in the 1948 Biennale, be hosted in the Italian Pavilion.⁵⁶

"Under the German flag" is not exactly a simple statement. Displaying the flag at the entrance of the pavilion was simply unthinkable in 1948 but had become possible and indeed significant in 1950, after the country's division into the Federal Republic of Germany and the German Democratic Republic.⁵⁷ The official tones, moreover,

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After proposing the distribution of the individual exhibitions in the pavilion, complete with an attached plan, Pallucchini tones down his curatorial meddling. "Of course, this letter of mine, in its details, is nothing but a recommendation, which I take the liberty of making to You, after having also studied the pavilion's plan a little, and which You, with your great competence, will evaluate for arrive at the best final form. But in this way, in my opinion, the pavilion would be very varied and of great interest". Letter to Hanfstaengl, October 20, 1949, ASAC, Fondo Storico, Scatole Nere, Paesi, box 13: "Germania, 1938–1952", folder "Artisti tedeschi", loose papers. At this point, it would be worthwhile looking once again at the analysis of the Pavilion's display as a curatorial choice entirely managed by Hanfstaengl. Joch, "Die Ära der Retrospektiven 1948 bis 1962", 93 and 95.

55

October 20, 1949: ASAC, Fondo Storico, Scatole Nere, Paesi, box 13: "Germania, 1938–1952", folder "Artisti tedeschi", loose papers.

56

February 22, 1950. ASAC, Fondo Storico, Scatole Nere, Paesi, box 13: "Germania, 1938–1952", folder "Artisti tedeschi", loose papers. Quoted from the Italian translation of the German original conserved in the archives. This letter seems to overturn Peter Joch's hypothesis ("Die Ära der Retrospektiven 1948 bis 1962", 93) that Hanfstaengl had intended to exhibit a retrospective of Kandinsky's entire production in the German Pavilion and not just that of the Munich period. A solution that, we know, met with fierce opposition from the painter's widow Nina – who reiterated to Giovanni Ponti that Kandinsky was "in no way German" – and seems ascribable to Pallucchini alone. There was a precedent for the presence of Kandinsky's exhibition in the German pavilion: the 1930 Biennale. Nazism, however, was the inevitable watershed.

57

The question of the flag recurs in the correspondence between the two scholars. Letters of April 18 and April 23, 1950: ASAC, Fondo Storico, Scatole Nere, Paesi, box 13: "Germania, 1938–1952", folder "Artisti tedeschi", loose papers. One of the poster sketches for the 25th Biennale, Paola Levi Montalcini's *Tavolozza internazionale*, shows a mosaic of flags, including that of Germany. Bertelé, *Arte sovietica alla Biennale di Venezia*, fig. 16.

had changed radically alongside the international framework. While the German participation of 1948 is now defined as “a friendly gesture”⁵⁸ and “of unofficial nature”,⁵⁹ West Germany is invited to the 25th Biennale as a nation. Once again, the Venetian showcase proves to be an optimal political proscenium.

This would be the occasion with which German artistic culture could fully re-present itself in the international realm. And let me tell you how pleased we are to offer you this opportunity. If, since 1948, we have sincerely wished that German artists were present in Venice, albeit within the modest limits the moment of grave uneasiness allowed, you can well imagine how we look with sincere gratification toward the possibility the 25th Biennale offers the new Germany to present itself in Venice in a manner appropriate to the most genuine tradition of its art, which Nazism had tried to stifle.⁶⁰

The expression “most genuine tradition” is revealing and is certainly not used by chance.⁶¹ The times required a rewriting of the past. Nazism, like Fascism, becomes a painful but brief parenthesis in history, which did not penetrate the essence of the two peoples. This is the historical need expressed in 1950, one that is strikingly anticipated in Pallucchini’s words in the correspondence from three years earlier.⁶² A precise reflection of this change is legible, once again, in the topographical layout of the Giardini and in the Biennale’s communication (the “new” Germany reappears on the official map, with its name). The catalogue reads:

After eight years, Germany has once again taken possession of its pavilion with a group of first-rate exhibitions, as well as a show of contemporary abstract artists. It is a highly appreciated and significant return, due above all to the fact that it re-proposes those masters that Nazi academic fury had tried to ban under the guise of degenerate art, even burning the works.⁶³

It was, as in 1948, another exhibition of “moral reparation” aimed at building the cultural profile of the young nation through recourse to its “modernist tradition” rather than the flagrancy of the present. With a singular symmetry, Expressionism comes to take on the strongly identitarian role claimed by Impressionism for France in the 1930s.⁶⁴ Not by chance, the exhibition finds its way back home, underscor-

58

Eberhard Hanfstaengl, “Germania”, in *XXV Biennale di Venezia. Catalogo* (June 8-October 15, 1950), exh. cat., 2nd ed. (Venice: Alfieri 1950), 308.

59

“This year, we forwarded the official invitation to the government of West Germany through our diplomatic representative in Frankfurt. We sincerely hope that Germany will officially participate in the next Biennale”. Pallucchini to Trier, December 1949: ASAC, Fondo Storico, Scatole Nere, Paesi, box 13: “Germania, 1938-1952”, folder “Artisti tedeschi”, loose papers.

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Pallucchini to Hanfstaengl. October 20, 1949: ASAC, Fondo Storico, Scatole Nere, Paesi, box 13: “Germania, 1938-1952”, folder “Artisti tedeschi”, loose papers.

61

In “Die Ära der Retrospektiven 1948 bis 1962”, 89ff Joch speaks of “rehabilitating recourse of tradition” and of “classical Modernism” to comment on the entire course of German cultural policy after World War II, devoted to redesigning its artistic history of avant-garde movements, such as Expressionism and Surrealism, as the real “founding myth” of the new Federal Republic of Germany. In contrast, the scholar points out how this anachronistic and to some extent “museological” approach paradoxically ends up reducing attention to the artistic movements of the present, which was the Biennale’s original vocation.

62

According to Martini and Cagol, Pallucchini gives the Biennale a real “Museological Turn” with the intensification of the retrospectives: in this sense, the affinity with Hanfstaengl’s politics as curator of the German Pavilion is not surprising (Collicelli Cagol and Martini, “The Venice Biennale in its Turning Points”, 84-90).

63

Pallucchini, “Introduzione alla XXIV Biennale”, XIX.

64

On the foundational presence of Expressionism at the Venice Biennales of the 1950s – after Der Blaue Reiter, in turn, in 1952, Die Brücke – see again, Joch, “Die Ära der Retrospektiven 1948 bis 1962”, 92-97.

ing, this time, the distance between the old Germany and the newly formed Federal Republic of Germany. The Kandinsky exhibition would be mounted in Brenno Del Giudice's building, between Mexico and the Venice Pavilion.⁶⁵

The “underground” Holocaust, the Works of Art

In this climate of unyielding condemnation of Nazi horror, which the 1948 and 1950 exhibitions share, one is struck by the official, apparent silence on the darkest page: the looting of works of art owned by Jewish families and deported, like the people, in sealed boxcars, to satisfy the appetites of an international market more than willing to turn a blind eye.⁶⁶ It is widely known that a substantial part of Impressionist production was part of the enlightened patronage of the great French and German Jewish collectors: they are the real symbol “of the freedom of artistic cultures” to which Pallucchini alludes in his letter to Hanfstaengl of November 1947.⁶⁷ An ideal and material heritage plundered cruelly and methodically and with the complicity of many people apparently above suspicion.⁶⁸

The dispersion of the collections originally owned by Jewish gallery owners and collectors, and sadly still at the centre of controversial battles with museum institutions,⁶⁹ seeps continuously out of the documents on the *Mostra degli Impressionisti*. This dramatic plot – perhaps too recent and too hot to surface in 1948? – is a substantial piece of its organisational fabric.⁷⁰ As I recounted in 2019, the infamy of this page of history transpires in the micro-stories woven into the preparation of the Venice exhibition: from the rejections of loan requests (many of the elite Jewish collectors, often refugees as a result of Nazi persecution, understandably

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Pallucchini to Hanfstaengl: “After what he has told me, let's leave the Kandinsky exhibition in the Italian Pavilion or in another pavilion that may remain available”. Typescript undated after February 1950: ASAC, Fondo Storico, Scatole Nere, Paesi, box 13: “Germania, 1938–1952”, folder “Artisti tedeschi”, loose papers.

66

See Castellani, “Il ‘Quarantotto’ degli impressionisti in Biennale”, 289–92. The looting of the art collections in Nazi occupied countries – seizures, roundups, and forced sales at usury rates – was carried out by the ERR - Reichsleiter Rosenberg Taskforce, a notorious Nazi organization led by Alfred Rosenberg. See Rose Valland, *Le Front de l'art: défense des collections françaises, 1939–1945* (Paris: Pion, 1961); augmented edition Thierry Bajou, Catherine Granger, Isabelle Le Masne de Chermont, Anne Liskenne, Emmanuelle Polack, Alain Prévot, Didier Schulmann (eds.) (Paris: Réunion des Musées Nationaux – Grand Palais, 2014); Lynn H. Nicholas, *The Rape of Europa. The Fate of Europe's Treasures in the Third Reich and the Second World War* (New York: Knopf, 1994). The looted works were grouped together in the so-called “Martyr's Room” at the Jeu de Paume in Paris. The institution has made a database available: <http://www.errproject.org/jeudepaume/>, last accessed July 2024. Another important source on the works looted during Nazism is the *Lost Art Database* created by the German Lost Art Foundation: https://www.lostart.de/Webs/EN/Datenbank/KunstfundMuenchenBestand.html?cms_param=SAMML_ID%3D1312, last accessed July 2024. See also the exhibition *Afterlives: Recovering the Lost Stories of Looted Art*, curated by Darsie Susan Alexander and Rose Elihu, New York, Jewish Museum of New York, August 20, 2021–January 9, 2022. On the subject of the forced acquisition and deportation of artworks from Jewish family collections in France, Gitta Ho just delivered a presentation. “At the Center of Interest: Competing Access to Jewish Collections and their Transport from Occupied France to Germany, 1940–1944”, conference *Infrastructures of Trading/Transferring Art since 1900* (Budapest, KEMKI – Central European Research Institute for Art History, 27 June 2024).

67

Cf. footnote no. 42.

68

The *Red Flag Names List*, or rather the blacklist of merchants, collectors, and art agents compromised by Nazi looting, compiled by the United States Art Looting Intelligence Unit (ALIUI) between 1945 and 1946, was made public in 1999. The documents are available online in the National Archives and Records Administration (NARA) platform, www.lostedart.com. In the sixteen registers, packed with data divided by nationality, one finds the names of illustrious art historians, dealers, collectors, bankers.

69

Among the most high-profile cases, made famous by a film, is Klimt's *Portrait of Adele Bloch-Bauer*, which the Belvedere Museum in Vienna finally returned after fifty years and the involvement of the United States Supreme Court.

70

It should be remembered that, at that time, it was very difficult to identify the colluders.

decline such requests from the Biennale)⁷¹ to the numerous attempts by owners, all of which failed, to obtain the restitution of the plundered assets using the exhibition as a channel to get them out of the occupied territories. Not surprisingly, one of the allied authorities' major concerns in loaning works off German soil is the guarantee against their seizure.⁷²

Among the many cases that have emerged from the archival documents,⁷³ arguably the most sensational concerns the *marchand-amateur* Paul Rosenberg, who sought refuge in New York after the occupation of Paris. The well-known gallery owner repeatedly offered to loan the Biennale works from his collection, which had been requisitioned by the Nazis in 1940 and then sold in Switzerland: an impressive series of masterpieces that included, among others, works by Degas, Monet, Renoir, Cézanne, and other Impressionist masters, to mention only the names that interested Pallucchini at that time.⁷⁴ The operation clearly sought to force the paintings off Swiss Federal territory, so that the property might be reclaimed in a more neutral court. "Rosenberg is ready to offer part of his collection taken by the Nazis to Switzerland and still now under dispute [...] If he can have this material, which he says is important, in the summer, you will be able to choose".⁷⁵ This "important material" probably also included Degas' *Madame Camus at the Piano* (1869), one of the pivotal works in Emil Bührle's collection, which was put together primarily from the remains of collections seized from the Jews, together, perhaps, with works by Renoir and other impressionists belonging to Hildebrand Gurlitt, a dealer who colluded with the Nazis.⁷⁶ To obtain the loan, Pallucchini tried to contact the Swiss judicial authorities directly, writing to Plinio Bolla, a judge on the Federal Supreme Court of Switzerland, who, on February 5 1948 reported that:

The Federal Supreme Court would not see any difficulty in allowing one or another of the sequestered paintings to leave Bern for the Venice exhibition, provided that the claimant Mr. Rosenberg and the defendant from whom the canvas is claimed have agreed [...] In the meantime, the lawsuit is pending, with the exception of the works

71

See Castellani, "Il 'Quarantotto' degli impressionisti in Biennale", 290-291.

72

Letter from Pallucchini to Orlandini April 28, 1948. See footnote no. 42.

73

This is what happened with a canvas by Manet and four drawings by Daumier that had been part of the collections of the painter Max Liebermann and his son-in-law Kurt Riezler, who sought refuge in the United States in 1938. The works had remained blocked in the American occupied area of Germany, and the heir's offer to loan them for the *Mostra degli Impressionisti* evidently envisaged using the Biennale as a safe conduit to get them off European soil and to the United States, where they would eventually arrive without passing through Venice. ASAC, Fondo Storico, Arti Visive, box 2, folder 6.

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In March 1941, the most important pieces of the Rosenberg collection – together with those from the Seligmann, Wildenstein, Rothschild, and other collections plundered by the ERR in Paris in 1940 – were loaded onto a special train headed in the direction of Neuschwanstein. Earmarked for the Führermuseum in Linz, they remained hidden in Ludwig's castle until the Monuments Men arrived. Nicholas, *The Rape of Europa*; <http://www.errproject.org/jeudepaume/>, ad nomen Rosenberg, last accessed September 2024. Complete list of raped pieces in Cultural Plunder by the Einsatzstab Reichsleiter Rosenberg, Database of Art Objects at the Jeu de Paume, <http://www.errproject.org/jeudepaume/>, ad nomen Rosenberg Paris, last accessed August 2024.

75

Tietze to Pallucchini, November 9, 1947. ASAC, Fondo Storico, Arti Visive, box 2, folder 1.

76

Although some scholars had long raised concerns about the dubious provenance of some Bührle's works, the scandal erupted only with the reinstallation of the collection in the new wing of the Kunsthaus Zurich on October 9, 2021. Jakob Tanner, "Zurich's Bührle Scandal in Context", *Passés Futurs*, no. 14 (2023), <https://www.politika.io/fr/article/zurichs-buhrle-scandal-in-context>, last accessed September 2024. On the case of Gurlitt, whose illicit trafficking with the Nazi emerged only after the collection's donation to the Museen Bern in 2014, see: https://www.swissinfo.ch/ita/elenco-di-opere-d-arte_le-verit%C3%A0-nascoste-della-collezione-gurlitt/, last accessed December 2022.

by Matisse, whose return to Rosenberg is no longer contested. But I suppose this painter does not interest you, in the context of implementing this exhibition, I mean...⁷⁷

In the end, not even this loan went through; indeed, the ordeal of the Rosenberg collection is still not over.⁷⁸

The Swiss market turned out to be the privileged channel for criminal Nazi trading. This fact emerged unequivocally after the declassification, in 1999, of the lists compiled by the ALIU⁷⁹ – the United States intelligence agency that, between 1943 and 1946, investigated the looting and illegal trafficking of works of art carried out by the Nazis – and the publication of *Red Flags Names List* of art lovers, experts, and art historians (which would perhaps be better labeled “black”). Many of these names, even illustrious and surprising ones, were involved in the organisation of the *Mostra degli Impressionisti*, and we now know colluded with the Nazis.⁸⁰ A passage in the exhibition circuit through the authoritative and prestigious platform of the Biennale can in fact prove useful not only for those claiming lost ownership, but also for “cleaning up” a suspicious provenance: this is perhaps the case with Degas’s superb pastel *Singer with a Glove* (1878), the iconic image of the Biennale’s exhibition.⁸¹ The web of loans to the *Mostra degli Impressionisti* is unfortunately woven with bitter threads.

The Soviet Pavilion closed

This chain of loans leads us back to the Giardini’s topography. Not far from the German Pavilion, another pavilion, that of the USSR, also remained empty in 1948, despite the repeated appeals of the Presidency of the Biennale.

In assembling the *Mostra degli Impressionisti* Pallucchini had courted the Soviet government at length, but to no avail, to obtain the loan of certain fundamental works from the Shchukin and Morosov collections, including Cézanne’s *Mardi Gras* (1888), Gauguin’s *Te tiare farani* (1891), and Renoir’s large portrait of *Jeanne Samary Standing* (1878), which were then preserved in the State Museum of New Western Art of Moscow. In the words of Lionello Venturi, who had seen these works at the Impressionism retrospective at the Exposition Internationale de Paris

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ASAC, Fondo Storico, Arti Visive, box 3, “1948: Gli Impressionisti francesi”, folder 7, “Svizzera”, loose papers). Pallucchini’s relationship with Bolla is cordial and probably predates the Rosenberg case. In December 1945, the Swiss Confederation had issued a decree on looted assets and established a dedicated *Raubgutkammer* (Looted Assets Tribunal) to evaluate restitution claims. See Tanner, “Zurich’s Bührle Scandal in Context”.

78

See Anne Sinclair, *21, Rue La Boétie* (Milan-Geneva: Skira, 2012). The legal battles are led by collector’s grand-daughter, Marianne Rosenberg.

79

The Independent Commission of Experts Switzerland, Second World War (ICE) was set up between 1996 and 2002 to investigate the assets that had arrived in Switzerland during and after the conflict. The results of the research are presented in a series of publications culminating in the *Final Report* of 2002: <https://www.uek.ch/it/index.htm>, last accessed July 2024.

80

From famous merchant-art lovers, such as César Mange De Hauke and André Schoeller, to collectors such as Baron Eduard von der Heydt and even Lionello Venturi’s son-in-law, Albert Skira. Castellani, “Il ‘Quarantotto’ degli impressionisti in Biennale”, 291-92.

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The work had been purchased in 1947 by Fritz Heer, a pneumatologist from Zurich. In this case, the buyer was perhaps an unsuspecting guarantor for a providential transit of property: right after the Biennale the pastel work would be sold to the American collector Maurice Wertheim, who, in 1951, left it to Fogg Art Museum at Harvard. The work had belonged to the French collector Camille Groult until 1908 and did not appear to be implicated in Holocaust crimes, but the heirs nevertheless negotiated a rushed sale with De Hauke. Castellani, “Il ‘Quarantotto’ degli impressionisti in Biennale”, 291.

in 1937, where they had caused quite a stir: “Everyone agrees that if the Russian government lends, the whole world will come to Venice”.⁸²

No stone was left unturned in trying to secure the paintings. Alongside the official diplomatic channels, the Ambassador to Rome Michail Kostylev helped test the waters of professional relationships, consulting, somewhat surprisingly, with the famous medievalist Viktor Lazarev, member of the Soviet Committee for the Arts. Even family relationships were called into play. The archives conserve considerable correspondence from Pallucchini to Lionello Venturi’s son, Franco, who was employed at the Italian Embassy in Moscow.⁸³ “Evidently”, Pallucchini wrote to the Communist painter Antonello Trombadori, “official diplomacy has to be helped with steps of a political and confidential nature”.⁸⁴ Despite the delicate internal political situation – Italy was in the midst of the Constituent Assembly – and affiliation with a moderate faction (Giovanni Ponti was one of the founding fathers of the Christian Democratic Party), the Biennale did not hesitate to knock on the door of the Italian Communist Party and its secretary Palmiro Togliatti.⁸⁵

The exchange of letters also allows us to measure a dramatic difference between intellectual positions. In their early contacts with Soviet institutions, Pallucchini and Ponti try to leverage the image of Impressionism as a symbol of a shared cultural, spiritual, and democratic *koiné*, from the perspective of a reconciliation between the Western European countries, which had until then been the most fruitful diplomatic weapon to obtain loans.⁸⁶ Demonstrating a total lack of awareness of the Stalinist attitude toward the international community, Pallucchini comes to think that

a great Impressionist exhibition [...] would be very appealing to the Moscow government, as it stands as testimony to the visitors who converge here from all over the world of how much interest the USSR has in artistic culture and how important heritage is in the field of art.⁸⁷

A better understanding of the sovereignty that characterised the Soviet cultural climate (and thanks to Franco Venturi too) soon suggested pragmatically exploiting its exact opposite: the *damnatio* of Impressionism, which, at that time in the USSR, was considered a symbol of a “formalist” and “bourgeois” cosmopolitanism completely alien to the identity of the Russian people. The most violent exponent of this view was Aleksandr Gerasimov, the powerful president of the newly resurrected Academy

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Venturi to Pallucchini, November 15, 1947: ASAC, Fondo Storico, Box 1, folder 2. These documents were first published in Castellani, “Il ‘Quarantotto’ degli impressionisti in Biennale”. Some of these documents are also referred to and discussed by Bertelé, *Arte sovietica alla Biennale di Venezia* chap. III, paragraph 2. For the relationships between the Italian Communist intellectuals and the USSR, see also Nicoletta Misler, *La via italiana al realismo. La politica culturale del PCI dal 1944 al 1956* (Milan: Mazzotta, 1973); *Guardando all'URSS. Realismo socialista in Italia dal mito al mercato* (May 30–October 4, 2015), exh. cat. (Milan: Skira, 2015).

83

See Antonello Venturi (ed.), *Franco Venturi e la Russia: con documenti inediti* (Milan: Feltrinelli, 2006). See also Bertelé, *Arte sovietica alla Biennale di Venezia*, chap. III, paragraph 2.

84

Quoted in Castellani, “Il ‘Quarantotto’ degli impressionisti in Biennale”, 287. Trombadori is destined to play an important role as a critical interlocutor in the cultural reorientation affording renewed Soviet participation in the Biennale, starting from 1959: Bertelé, *Arte sovietica alla Biennale di Venezia*, chap. III, paragraph 4.

85

Togliatti makes it known that he “has brought particular attention to” the loan request and that “in the case that it does not succeed [...] he himself will intervene by other means”. Quoted in Castellani, “Il ‘Quarantotto’ degli impressionisti in Biennale”, 287.

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“I would like to point out the Exhibition’s great importance and usefulness for the benefit of culture and as an affirmation of solidarity in the realm of spirit”. Letter to Russian Ambassade, October 28, 1947. Quoted in Castellani, “Il ‘Quarantotto’ degli impressionisti in Biennale”, 287.

87

Letter to Franco Venturi, November 24, 1947: ASAC, Fondo Storico, Arti Visive, box 1, “1948. Mostre storiche. Gli impressionisti francesi”, folder 7, “Russia. Museo di Mosca”, loose papers.

of Fine Arts.⁸⁸ Condemnation would have meant the public obliteration of the paintings, then relegated to depositories, until the State Museum of the New Western Art closed in 1948.⁸⁹ Franco Venturi showed foresight in evoking his emotional encounters with Impressionist paintings sadly sealed away in warehouses:

One of the most influential people in the field of art in the Soviet Union today, Gerasimov, does not hide his strong disapproval of the French Impressionists from anyone. But it is hoped that the museum will reopen soon and, in any case, the fact that the paintings are not currently on display may favour the request from the Venice Biennale.⁹⁰

Despite the insistence of the official and unofficial letters from Venice on the ease and advantage of moving works that were already packed in crates, and despite numerous efforts and some typically generic assurances in response, the paintings in the Russian museum never arrived in Venice.

In this patient yet unproductive skirmish, the “arm” of Soviet national participation is extensively but uselessly invoked. Here as well, the correspondence conserved at the ASAC and in the Pallucchini archives in Udine bears witness to a story of many overtures, opaque responses, and long silences, a reflection of Stalin’s isolationist policy that is not without unsettling parallels today.⁹¹ A 1952 note from Pallucchini to Mario Novello, executive director of the Biennale Secretariat, well describes the uncomfortable atmosphere and the stakes:

The question of Russia is very important [...] In any case, the arrival of the Russians must not be lost. And so negotiate, taking time and playing: talk about it with Piccini, Bazzoni, and Zorzi. Without other ears!⁹²

“Negotiate, taking time, and playing”: the Biennale now seems determined to use the same language as its interlocutors. In January 1948, in an effort to secure Soviet participation, Pallucchini even offered to pay for the Pavilion’s restoration, some-

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Impressionist works were judged “anti-popular and formalist, of Western European bourgeois art, devoid of any progressive and educational message for the Soviet public”. Bertelé, *Arte sovietica alla Biennale di Venezia*, chap. III, paragraph 2.

89

In 1948 the State Museum of the New Western Art was closed, as a symbol of a “servility” to Western culture, and its collections divided between the Hermitage and Pushkin Museum. Maria Mileeva, *Utopia in Retreat: The Closure of the State Museum of the New Western Art in 1948*, in Christina Lodder, Maria Kokkori, and Maria Mileeva (eds.), *Utopian Reality* (Leiden-Boston: Brill, 2013), 203-18.

90

Franco Venturi to Pallucchini, letter from the Italian Embassy, Moscow, December 10, 1947: ASAC, Fondo Storico, Arti Visive, box 1, “1948. Mostre storiche. Gli impressionisti francesi”, folder 7, “Russia. Museo di Mosca”, loose papers.

91

For an effective analysis of Soviet cultural chauvinism in the context of the Biennales, see Bertelé, *Arte sovietica alla Biennale di Venezia*, chap. III, paragraphs 2 and 3. See also Matthew Cullerne Bown, *Art under Stalin* (London: Phaidon Press, 1991).

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ASAC, Fondo Storico, Scatole Nere, Paesi, box 31, “U.R.S.S. 1947-1962. Uruguay 1951-1964”, folder “XXVI Biennale. U.R.S.S.1952”, loose papers. Pallucchini refers to Count Elio Zorzi, who was head of the Biennale press office for a long time and the first director of the postwar Film Festival, to Giovanni Piccini, chief administrator of the Biennale, and to Romolo Bazzoni, former chief administrator of the Biennale and author of *60 anni della Biennale di Venezia* (Venice: Lombroso, 1962).

thing practically unheard of given that the responsibility for maintaining the building, suspended in limbo between the Biennale and the Soviet government for years, was the subject of a long nerve-wracking game of cultural politics.⁹³ But the Pavilion remained empty. In reality, the USSR had not exhibited at the Biennale since 1934 and would not return until 1956, with the political turn undertaken by Khrushchev. As Matteo Bertelé has written, the entire course of the Soviet pavilion at the Biennale expresses a shrewd strategy of absences and presences on the Western exhibition scene.⁹⁴

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The Soviet government had claimed ownership of the pavilion in 1928, yet despite repeated requests, the USSR had never taken over the building's maintenance. The tension continued until 1955. The entire correspondence is in ASAC, partially referred by Bertelé, *Arte sovietica alla Biennale di Venezia*, chap. III, paragraph 1. See also Marylène Malbert, "Le retour de l'URSS à la Biennale de Venise en 1956", *Histoire de l'art*, special issue *Art, pouvoir et politique*, no. 55 (2004): 119-29; Francesca Zanella, "Russi in Biennale. Intorno alla XXVIII edizione (1956)", in *Guardando all'URSS*, 125-42.

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Bertelé, *Arte sovietica alla Biennale di Venezia*.

Author's Biography

Francesca Castellani is Professor of Contemporary Art History at Università Iuav di Venezia and part of the PhD program in History of Arts in Venice. Her research has long focused on the history of exhibition systems and display strategies, with a particular emphasis on the Venice Biennale. She coordinates the research unit BiTES – Biennale Theories & Stories, and curates *Lo Scrittoio della Biennale*, a series of scholarly meetings that, since 2009, has served as a platform for debate on the Venice Biennale. From 2022 to 2024, she led the project

"Staging Exhibit Display", dedicated to exploring theories and practices of exhibition design. In 2017, she co-organized the conference *Esposizioni/Exhibition* at CSAC Parma. On these themes, Castellani has published essays and edited several books, including *Sulla Biennale: storie da un cantiere di studio* (Milan 2024); *Questioning Exhibit Display. Theories, Forms, Perspectives* (with Jérôme Glicenstein and Francesca Zanella, Paris 2024); and *Crocevia Biennale* (with Eleonora Charans, Milan 2017).

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	The 25th Venice Art Biennale and the Avant-garde Retrospective Exhibitions Designed by Carlo Scarpa: Palazzo Centrale as a Space of International Dialogue between Italy and France Letizia Giardini Abstract This paper aims to demonstrate how Palazzo Centrale’s main hall in the Giardini became a space for dialogue and cooperation between Italy and France during the 25th Venice Art Biennale. The two countries jointly developed a retrospective narrative on Fauvism, Cubism and Futurism, with a display designed by Carlo Scarpa. For the first time, this research underlines how these exhibitions questioned the national dimension of each artistic movement and anticipated the critical debate on the transnational modern art koine, which non-governmental cultural institutions, such as AICA, addressed in the following years. Thanks to a delicate balance of administrative and diplomatic dynamics, new generations were finally able to acquire a greater knowledge of Modern Art. Keywords Modern art, Venice Art Biennale, France, Avant-garde Retrospective Exhibitions, Carlo Scarpa, AICA.		
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The 25th Venice Art Biennale and the Avant-garde Retrospective Exhibitions Designed by Carlo Scarpa: Palazzo Centrale as a Space of International Dialogue between Italy and France¹

Letizia Giardini

In 1950 three international retrospective exhibitions, hosted in the Palazzo Centrale of the Venice Biennale's Giardini, were dedicated to key avant-garde artists who profoundly changed European culture at the beginning of the 20th century: *I Fauves*, *Quattro Maestri del Cubismo*, *I firmatari del primo manifesto futurista* (The Fauves, Four Masters of Cubism, The Signatories of the First Futurist Manifesto). Featuring a selection of artworks created between 1905 and 1914, the exhibition design by Carlo Scarpa spatially interpreted in the main hall the three curatorial projects conceived by the Commission for Figurative Art.

On this occasion, the Palazzo Centrale became a space for international dialogue between Italy and France, and this article aims to illustrate how these two nations' synergic collaboration made it possible to address a relevant topic which non-governmental institutions, such as the International Association of Art Critics (AICA)², examined some years later: the supranational dimension of modern art. To investigate the modernist koine, post-war art historians needed to question the existence of the movements' national boundaries and the value of their own identity and traditions. As a polyphonic curatorial platform, the Venice Biennale was the ideal framework for developing a historical-critical analysis of these phenomena.

Carlo Scarpa and the Commission for Figurative Art turned the Palazzo Centrale into a space where not only were Italian curatorial and academic interests expressed, but where it was also possible to understand the phenomena of modern art both nationally and internationally.

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The methodology adopted to conduct this research was based on the in-depth study of each retrospective exhibition's curatorial project, from the organisational process to its critical reception. The comparative and interdisciplinary approach facilitated the framing of the museum narrative from a broader perspective, not limited to the Italian cultural scene, according to historical and geopolitical coordinates. This research presents several unpublished documents kept at the Archivio Storico delle Arti Contemporanee of the Venice Biennale, identified in the notes by the archival references. I also want to thank Prof. Irene Baldriga and Prof. Carla Subrizi for the stimulating exchange of ideas, Irene Quarantini for the careful reading and ASAC for permission to publish the images.

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To further explore this topic, see: <https://aicainternational.news/about>.

Retrospective Narratives

In December 1950, the director of the Association Française d'Action Artistique, Philippe Erlanger, wrote to Giovanni Ponti, president of the Venice Biennale, to congratulate him on the great success of the 25th iteration. This was due “not only to the broad participation of foreign states, but also to the quality of the works presented, the contemporary relevance of the artists, and the significance of both solo and retrospective exhibitions”.³ Since 1948 these historical exhibition narratives have played, in fact, a pivotal role in the organisation of the Biennale's programme: as a cultural consequence of several years of conflict, it had become necessary to fill the public's widespread gaps in knowledge about late 19th and early 20th century international modern art movements.⁴ As explained by the General Secretary, Rodolfo Pallucchini,⁵ the members of the Commission for Figurative Art had to return to the principles that had guided the first biennial in 1895, therefore offering those unable to travel “the means of understanding and comparing the most diverse aesthetic tendencies” and enhancing “the intellectual heritage of young local artists, who, inspired by the works of their counterparts from other nations, would be drawn toward broader conceptions”.⁶ This would have been the only way to restore the quality of a Venice International Art Exhibition that had lately been reduced to a formal celebration of contemporary art, shaped by academic conformism.⁷

Nevertheless, in addition to its educational function, the Biennale represented an effective diplomatic tool at that time for restoring relations with the countries Italy had fought with or against during the two world wars. Furthermore, the involvement of foreign critics, collectors, and museum directors in the definition of curatorial projects became strategically necessary to obtain the loans of works of art. In this sense, the example of James Thrall Soby is illustrative: when Gino Severini was informed that the American critic would have joined the organising committee for the Futurist retrospective exhibition of 1950, he had positively welcomed the news, confident that his knowledge and experience would guarantee the presence of masterpieces from the United States.⁸

The analysis of retrospective exhibitions promoted during Pallucchini's era (1948-1956) reveals that the Venice Biennale devoted considerable space to the presentation of the French art scene, starting from the 19th century. After the impressionist retrospective of 1948 and those dedicated to Fauvism, Cubism, Georges Seurat, Jacques Villon and Henri Julien Félix Rousseau in 1950, the exhibitions *Divisionismo in Francia*, *Jean-Baptiste Camille Corot*, *Chaim Soutine* and *L'opera grafica di Henri Toulouse Lautrec* in 1952, *Jean Désiré Gustave Courbet* in 1954, *Eugène Delacroix* in 1956 were organised. However, this choice did not entail an absence of historical exhibitions on avant-garde artists from other nations. The celebrated retrospective of the 24th Biennale therefore turned out to be a vast watershed event. For the first time in Italy, French Impressionism was successfully contextualised, according to a scientific criterion, in the broader European

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ASAC, Fondo Storico, Paesi, b. 12, Francia, Corrispondenza con il Prof. Philippe Erlanger: letter from Philippe Erlanger–Direttore dell'Association Française d'Action Artistique to Giovanni Ponti–Presidente e Commissario Straordinario della Biennale, December 12, 1950.

4

Giovanni Ponti, Commissione per le Arti Figurative, “Regolamento della XXIV Biennale”, in *Ventiquattresima Esposizione Biennale Internazionale d'Arte* (Venice, May 1 – September 30, 1948), exh. cat. (Venice: Serenissima, 1948), 1.

5

Rodolfo Pallucchini, “Introduzione alla XXIV Biennale”, in *Ventiquattresima Esposizione Biennale Internazionale d'Arte* (Venice, May 1 – September 30, 1948), exh. cat. (Venice: Serenissima, 1948), xii.

6

“Introduzione alla I Biennale”, in *Prima Esposizione Biennale Internazionale d'Arte*, (Venice, April 22 – October 30, 1895), exh. cat. (Venice: Visentini, 1895), iv.

7

Pallucchini, “Introduzione alla XXIV Biennale”, xii.

8

ASAC, Fondo storico, Arti Visive, b. 20, Corrispondenza con artisti o famiglie. Futuristi, Gino Severini: letter from Gino Severini to Giovanni Ponti – Commissario Straordinario, October 23, 1949.

panorama.⁹ Developed from Roberto Longhi's proposal, this anthological exhibition benefited from Lionello Venturi's expertise and his relationships with figures such as the heirs of Paul Durand-Ruel.¹⁰

During the first preliminary meeting for the 25th iteration of the Biennale, held on September 16, 1949, art historian Carlo Ludovico Ragghianti immediately drew the attention of the other members of the Commission for Figurative Art to the need to discuss the chronological criterion according to which the artists would be selected for the following historical exhibitions.¹¹ Opening a lively debate, he proposed orientating the programming to the early French 19th century or the post-impressionist period and beginning of the 20th. Despite their proverbial difference of opinions, on this occasion, both Venturi and Longhi supported Ragghianti's second idea and agreed to present European art from more recent decades: while Venturi recommended focusing on Cubism and Futurism, and organising a solo exhibition of Matisse and one of abstract sculpture, Longhi instead suggested including George Seurat and the Fauves.¹² Their proposals, all of which were to be realised that year, should be read in the light of the two art historians' respective positions in the debate on figurative and abstract art,¹³ a debate that became increasingly urgent to document within the Biennale.¹⁴

In the end, as Pallucchini pointed out, the criterion had to be chosen given the difficulties of obtaining French loans for exhibitions on painters such as Delacroix and Courbet: "We hope that the French government will take appropriate action should the legislation concerning the exchange of works of art be enacted. On the other hand, if we were to turn to America, the substantial costs involved would not be compatible with the funding available".¹⁵ For this reason, two months later the General Secretary wrote to the ambassador J.R. Vieillefond:

As you can see, this year the Biennale once again dedicates a part of its programme to French art! Naturally, we would now require the backing of the French Government to secure certain loans from state museums, as well as those from provincial institutions. [...] I am likewise of the opinion

9

Francesca Castellani, "Il 'Quarantotto' degli impressionisti in biennale. Storie, politiche, battaglie", in Claudio Lorenzini (ed.), *Rodolfo Pallucchini: storie, archivi prospettive critiche* (Udine: Forum, 2019), 281; "Venice Biennale 1946. The Mostra degli Impressionisti at the German Pavilion and its Politics", in *OBOE Journal*, no. 5, vol. 1 (2024): 59-77.

10

Laura Iamurri, "Collegli nell'università e nella lotta per l'arte moderna", in Claudio Lorenzini (ed.), *Rodolfo Pallucchini: storie, archivi prospettive critiche* (Udine: Forum, 2019), 72.

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At that time, the twelve members of the Commission for Figurative Art were Nino Barbantini, Carlo Carrà, Felice Casorati, Giuseppe Fiocco, Leoncillo Leonardi, Roberto Longhi, Giacomo Manzù, Marino Marini, Giorgio Morandi, Rodolfo Pallucchini, Carlo Ludovico Ragghianti and Lionello Venturi. ASAC, Fondo storico, Arti Visive, b. 32, I quattro verbali delle sedute della Commissione AF XXV B1950, Verbale I riunione, September 16/17, 1949.

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ASAC, Fondo storico, Arti Visive, b. 32, I quattro verbali delle sedute della Commissione AF XXV B1950, Verbale I riunione, September 16/17, 1949, 6-9. To further explore Roberto Longhi and Lionello Venturi's involvement in the critical debate on Cubism and more specifically on Futurism in the first decades of the 20th century, see: Silvia Evangelisti, "Longhi e il futurismo", in Claudio Spadoni (ed.), *Da Renoir a De Staël. Roberto Longhi e il moderno* (Milano: Mazzotta, 2003), 77-82; Stefano Valeri, "Lionello Venturi e Filippo Tommaso Marinetti. Documenti della nota polemica dalla stampa degli anni 1929-1930", *Storia dell'Arte*, no. 130 (2011): 123-144.

13

Venturi's proposal to organise an exhibition on abstract sculpture became a bone of contention between the two art historians and, to counterbalance this idea, Longhi suggested presenting the Fauves and a selection of George Seurat's drawings. In 1950 he dedicated an essay to the French artist in the journal *Paragone*, where he also announced the participation of John Rewald in the Biennale's retrospective exhibition committee. For further discussion, see: Maria Cristina Bandera, "Longhi tra la Biennale di Venezia e 'Paragone'", in Claudio Spadoni (ed.), *Da Renoir a De Staël. Roberto Longhi e il Moderno* (Milano: Mazzotta, 2003), 151-173; Maria Cristina Bandera, *Il carteggio Longhi-Pallucchini. Le prime Biennali del dopoguerra 1948-1956* (Milano: Charta, 1999).

14

Pallucchini, "Introduzione alla XXIV Biennale", xiv.

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ASAC, Fondo storico, Arti Visive, b. 32, I quattro verbali delle sedute della Commissione AF XXV B1950, Verbale I riunione, September 16/17, 1949, 7.

that it would be in the best interest of the French Government to make a significant effort in support of the Biennale, a platform where French artistic culture can truly shine, especially considering the increased number of foreign participants expected in 1950 compared to 1948. Moreover, the pilgrims who visit Rome will undoubtedly visit Venice as well.¹⁶

Thus, the international and multidisciplinary constitution of the commissions of *I Fauves, Quattro Maestri del Cubismo, I firmatari del primo manifesto futurista* was conceived to multiply the possibilities for exchange of artworks. Nevertheless, they were also designed to broaden the perspectives of critical interpretation and to encourage the comparison of different research methods. For this latter reason, alongside chief curators of prestigious institutions and collectors, well-known art dealers such as Daniel-Henry Kahnweiler were involved for their expertise.¹⁷ The purpose of this decision was to undermine preconceptions about the controversial role of the art merchant, which was still being debated during the second meeting of the Commission for Figurative Art in October 1949. As the minutes show, Roberto Longhi strongly disagreed with the idea mooted by the artists Carlo Carrà and Felice Casorati of listing foreign art dealers as mere lenders in the catalogue to avoid the eventual wrath of Italian gallerists. According to him, doubting their competence was just a “long-standing Italian hypocrisy”,¹⁸ since merchants were increasingly proving to be among the best art connoisseurs, to the point that museums were beginning to place complete trust in them. As confirmed by Venturi, Kahnweiler’s publications and the acuity of De Hauke were proof of this.¹⁹

Economic and financial factors also determined the quality and quantity of the masterpieces presented in the Fauvist, Cubist, and Futurist retrospective exhibitions of 1950. The example of *Les Femmes d'Alger* is emblematic of how difficulties and high costs of transportation from the United States were managed. The significance of this painting in the development of Cubism made its inclusion in the exhibition essential, and since the painting could not be exhibited at the Biennale, it was decided that a preliminary sketch of the artwork belonging to the European collection of André Lefèvre should be shown instead.²⁰ The Commission for Figurative Art was convinced that this solution could clarify some original aspects of the artistic movement and, therefore, preserve the scientific accuracy of the exhibition.²¹ An article by Alberto Rossi on the newspaper *La Stampa* sustained this choice as follows:

The “Femmes”, now housed at the Museum of Modern Art in New York, is not present at the Biennale. However, there is a study for one of the figures on the right, which clearly reveals both the innovative use of deep and intense colours — particularly the phosphorescent blues — as well as the way in which the form and volume are interpreted and rendered by moving beyond traditional chiaroscuro and employing bold striations within the pictorial medium.²²

16

ASAC, Fondo Storico, Paesi, b. 12, Francia, Rapporti con l'ambasciatore francese a Roma, il Prof. Vieillefond; l'ambasciatore italiano a Parigi: letter from Rodolfo Pallucchini to Prof. Vieillefond, November 21, 1949.

17

To further explore the role of Kahnweiler in the development of Cubism, see Béatrice Joyeux-Prunel, “La costruzione del canone modernista. Un fenomeno circolare di accumulazione simbolica (1850-1970)”, *900 Transnazionale* 2, no. 1 (March 2018): 42-55.

18

ASAC, Fondo storico, Arti Visive, b. 32, I quattro verbali delle sedute della Commissione AF XXV B1950, Verbale II riunione, October 27/28, 1949, 2.

19

Ibid.

20

Venticinquesima Esposizione Biennale Internazionale d'Arte, 56.

21

ASAC, Fondo storico, Arti Visive, b. 32, I quattro verbali delle sedute della Commissione AF XXV B1950, Verbale stenografico della riunione della commissione dei giorni 28 e 29 gennaio 1950 (Sartori), 2-3.

22

Alberto Rossi, “Storia del gusto alla Biennale. Nascita del Cubismo”, *La Stampa-Torino*, June 29, 1950.

Carlo Scarpa's Exhibition Projects

fig. 1
Twenty-fifth Venice Art Biennale. Central hall of the Italian Pavilion (Room IV, V, VI) with the Fauvist, Cubist and Futurist retrospective exhibitions designed by Carlo Scarpa. Archivio Storico della Biennale di Venezia, ASAC, Fototeca, Attualità e allestimenti, A.V.53. 1950. 16. Image courtesy of Archivio Storico della Biennale di Venezia, ASAC. Photograph by Foto Giacomelli – Venezia.



In 1950 the main hall in the Palazzo Centrale was made up of three interconnected but distinct areas, where the retrospective exhibitions *I Fauves*, *Quattro Maestri del Cubismo*, and *I firmatari del primo manifesto futurista* were set up chronologically [fig.1]. Since the beginning, the Commission for Figurative Art conceived the three exhibition projects as interrelated.²³ During the first meeting in September 1949, in response to Pallucchini who presented the possibility of showing Cubism and Futurism in the main hall of the Palazzo Centrale, Ragghianti proposed increasing the number of artworks included in the adjacent Fauvist exhibition, thereby affording a comprehensive representation of European painting between 1900 and 1914.²⁴ The limited space and the adopted curatorial principle of quality over quantity required a meticulous selection of artists.²⁵ To prevent jumbled or sloppy displays, it was decided that the Cubist and Futurist historical exhibitions would be solely dedicated to the initiators of these movements.²⁶ As further explained by Pallucchini in an interview for *L'Avvenire d'Italia*, a chronological continuity had been established with the impressionist exhibition of the previous year.²⁷ Speaking of Italian art, he added: “New movements in modern art are emerging, creating

²³

The commission for *I Fauves* was composed by Jean Cassou, Douglas Cooper, Georges Duthuit, Jean Leymarie, Roberto Longhi, Carlo Ludovico Ragghianti, Arnold Rüdinger, and Denys Sutton; Carlo Carrà, Jean Cassou, Douglas Cooper, Daniel-Henry Kahnweiler, Maurice Raynal, Lamberto Vitali were nominated for *Quattro Maestri del Cubismo*, while the *I firmatari del primo manifesto futurista*'s committee comprised Umbro Apollonio, Carlo Carrà, Raffaele Carrieri, Giuseppe Marchiori, Benedetta Marinetti, Gino Severini, James Thrall Soby.

²⁴

ASAC, Fondo storico, Arti Visive, b. 32, I quattro verbali delle sedute della Commissione AF XXV B1950, I riunione della Commissione per le Arti Figurative alla XXV B. 16 e 17 settembre 1949 – nella sede di Ca' Giustinan e S. Marco (verbale con appunti manoscritti), 10-12.

²⁵

Rodolfo Pallucchini, “Qualità contro numero”, *La Biennale*, no. 2 (October 1950): 3.

²⁶

In response to the letter from Raymond Cogniat dated February 24, 1950, Pallucchini wrote: “After lengthy discussions, it has been decided that, given the limited space at our disposal, we shall exhibit only a few leading figures — specifically the initiators of the movement, namely Braque, Picasso, Gris, and Léger. The same approach has been taken for the exhibition of Italian Futurism, which will only showcase the origins of this movement by limiting itself to the initial exhibitions in Paris and Milan.” ASAC, Fondo Storico, Paesi, b. 12, Francia, Corrispondenza con il Prof. Raymond Cogniat: letter from Rodolfo to Raymond Cogniat, March 1, 1950.

²⁷

P.R., “Fauves, cubisti, futuristi e importanti personali”, *L'avvenire d'Italia Bologna*, January 28, 1950.

a discourse that is more universal than ever. One might say it is international, paralleling political ideas that have evolved from the concept of region to that of nation, and which today are moving towards a supranational perspective”.²⁸ French and Italian avant-garde artists largely contributed to the development of the modern art koine, and the critical texts of each Biennale’s retrospective exhibition underlined the osmosis between them.

In his contextualisation of the Fauves, Roberto Longhi included references to Ardengo Soffici and the Cubist period of Georges Braque; he contrasted the poetic animal imagery that characterised this group of artists with the formal conceptualism evoked by the term Cubism.²⁹ Art historian Douglas Cooper underlined the influence of Cubism on figures such as Boccioni and Carrà,³⁰ while the art critic Umbro Apollonio highlighted the differences between the two avant-garde movements. The latter explained that Futurism did not pose problems of a formal nature, as did Impressionism and Cubism, but rather represented a critical and cultural manifestation; in his opinion, the parallelism between the Italian and French movements could not be overlooked.³¹

Carlo Scarpa was in charge of the exhibition projects and managed to convey this historical-critical perspective through the simplicity and clarity of the display’s elements. The architect resorted to panels of different heights and colours to mark out the space rhythmically: visitors were invited to dwell on the artworks of each avant-garde without ignoring those presented in the adjacent room since the partitions had a disjunctive and conjunctive function. Although these dividers defined areas, they did not isolate the three retrospective exhibitions and made it possible to visually connect Fauvist, Cubist, and Futurist artworks.

Scholars Bianca Albertini e Sandro Bagnoli highlighted that the 25th Biennale’s main hall project was a variation of the one conceived for the 1948 iteration, when the corresponding rooms hosted the exhibitions *Arturo Martini, Tre pittori metafisici dal 1910 al 1920, Massimo Campigli-Filippo De Pisis*.³² The shows shared many similarities, from vertical partitions to textile elements that interacted in different ways with the light sources. Comparing the plan drawn up for the Palazzo Centrale in 1948³³ [fig. 2] with that published in the 25th Biennale’s catalogue, it shows that the former was still a provisional version based on the 1948 layout: the longitudinal panel, which had previously divided Massimo Campigli’s from the Filippo De Pisis’ exhibition, was removed and the space rearranged. *I Fauves* took up more space than Cubism and Futurism, which an orthogonal partition separated. Despite this diaphragmic structure, the architect made it possible to glimpse artworks in room VI from rooms IV and V, as if visitors could experience the permeability of cultural and geographical borders through their gazes and bodies.

This panelled solution, codified in several of Carlo Scarpa’s displays,³⁴ allowed the public to get a foretaste of what they would later find themselves in front of, meaning they had at the same time the opportunity to re-examine paintings and sculptures from different perspectives. Moreover,

28

Ibid.

29

Roberto Longhi, “I Fauves”, in *Venticinquesima Esposizione Biennale Internazionale d’Arte* (Venice, June 8 – October 15, 1950), exh. cat. (Venice: Alfieri, 1950), 44–46.

30

Douglas Cooper, “Quattro maestri del cubismo”, in *Venticinquesima Esposizione Biennale Internazionale d’Arte* (Venice, June 8 – October 15, 1950), exh. cat. (Venice: Alfieri, 1950), 51–53.

31

Umbro Apollonio, “I firmatari del primo manifesto futurista”, in *Venticinquesima Esposizione Biennale Internazionale d’Arte* (Venice, June 8 – October 15, 1950), exh. cat. (Venice: Alfieri, 1950), 57–60.

32

Bianca Albertini and Sandro Bagnoli, *Scarpa. I Musei e le esposizioni* (Milano: Jaca Book, 1992), 255.

33

The blue inscriptions were not drawn by Carlo Scarpa; his handwriting is recognisable in the pencil notes.

34

To further explore this topic, see Bianca Albertini and Sandro Bagnoli, *Scarpa. I Musei e le esposizioni*, 18, 44–45, 57–72.

fig. 2
Twenty-fifth Venice Art Biennale. Plan of the Giardini Central Palace. Scale 1:200. Archivio Storico della Biennale di Venezia, ASAC, Fondo Storico, Lavori e gestione delle sedi, Padiglioni, 3, Padiglione ITALIA 1948-1962. Courtesy: Archivio Storico della Biennale di Venezia, ASAC.



photographic documentation shows that the overall view was as important as the focus on each historical avant-garde. The homogeneity of the project was guaranteed by the uniform colour of the walls (except for a few partitions), the balanced distribution of the artworks, almost all displayed at the same height, and the short veil running vertically around the hall's perimeter.³⁵ This last exploited the light medium to create meaningful shadow zones and ensured continuity in reading the movements by physically connecting the three spaces.

Paintings also represented a way to reinforce the thread running through the avant-garde movements displayed in the main hall: the retrospective exhibitions included artworks created between 1905 and 1914³⁶ and those of Braque, displayed in two of the three rooms simultaneously, demonstrated how during these years the French artist distanced himself from the Fauves³⁷ and became one of the four masters of Cubism. The display allows a comparison between Braque's early *Port of Antwerp* (1906) with *The Waltz* (1912), situated in Rooms IV and V respectively. The painting of Gino Severini instead provides a reason to investigate two additional aspects of the Biennale's three retrospective exhibitions related to the spatial

³⁵

Orietta Lanzarini has been alone in providing architectural analyses of these Carlo Scarpa's exhibition projects, until now. See Orietta Lanzarini, *Carlo Scarpa. L'architetto e le arti. Gli anni della Biennale di Venezia 1948-1972* (Venice: Regione del Veneto Marsilio, 2003), 72. To investigate Carlo Scarpa's use of textile elements, see also Paolo Iannello, *Carlo Scarpa in Sicilia 1952-1978* (Roma: Campisano, 2018), 33.

³⁶

Pallucchini, "Introduzione alla XXV Biennale", xvi.

³⁷

Garibaldi Marussi, "Anticipi sulla Biennale", *La Provincia - Como*, April 20, 1950.

organisation of the Palazzo Centrale and the precedent of *Twentieth-century Italian art* held at MoMA in 1949.³⁸ The Commission for Figurative Art made *I Fauves, Quattro Maestri del Cubismo, I firmatari del primo manifesto futurista* the lynchpin of the exhibition's itinerary, establishing connections with other areas in the building. The rooms IX and XXXV offered a diachronic presentation of the artworks of Carrà and Severini, documenting their Metaphysical and Cubist periods respectively.³⁹ Jacques Villon's solo exhibition in room XLIX was not located far away and was curated by Jerome Mellquist and Lionello Venturi, whose critical text explained the artist's role in founding the Section d'Or. Furthermore, Gino Severini's *Hiéroglyphiques dynamiques du Bal Tabarin* (1912) did not go unnoticed in room VI.⁴⁰ The artist, a member of the exhibition's organising committee, had advocated the loan from America, writing to Umbro Apollonio:

I would strongly recommend that you take prompt action regarding the painting *Hiéroglyphe du Bal Tabarin* from 1911-12, which is located at the Museum of Modern Art in New York. It seems that it was displayed there during the Italian art exhibition, receiving widespread acclaim. Some time ago, I wrote to Mr. Soby, who, as you are aware, is a member of the committee, but I have not yet received a reply. There are other works in New York, as you will see in the lists, and I respectfully urge you to take every possible measure to include them. The same applies to the two works in London. Essentially, it is of utmost importance to organise an exhibition of significant historical value. Given that there is a retrospective of Cubism, this is indeed a unique moment to properly situate our movement according to its merit. It seems that Professor Pallucchini shares this view, and I am very pleased about that.⁴¹

This letter suggests that the commissioners of the Biennale's retrospective exhibitions were well aware of the relevance of the *Twentieth-century Italian Art* exhibition that was held at MoMA. Curated by James Thrall Soby and Alfred H. Barr Jr., it was conceived as "a general introduction to modern Italian art"⁴² and represented "the first exhibition since World War II to focus on a single European nation"⁴³ hosted by the American museum. Regarding the historical narrative developed in Venice a year later, it is not only noteworthy that James Thrall Soby was a member of the Futurist representation, but also that Barr related the genesis of the Italian avant-garde to the French context in the 1949 exhibition catalogue. MoMA's director emphasised Severini's decisive role in introducing the Futurists to Cubism in France and establishing contact with the critic Félix Fénéon for the 1912 exhibition at the Galerie Bernheim-Jeune.⁴⁴ The juxtaposition of the three retrospective exhibitions at the Palazzo Centrale in 1950 deepened this perspective, while Carlo Scarpa's display contributed to portraying Paris as one of the epicentres of the European avant-garde of the early 20th century.⁴⁵

38

Twentieth-century Italian art, Museum of Modern Art of New York (June 28 – September 18, 1949).

39

Venticinquesima Esposizione Biennale Internazionale d'Arte, 71-73; 163-164.

40

Ibid., 62.

41

ASAC, Fondo storico, Arti Visive, b. 20, Corrispondenza con artisti o famiglie. Futuristi, Gino Severini: letter from Gino Severini to Umbro Apollonio, February 15, 1950.

42

Alfred H. Barr and James Thrall Soby, *Twentieth-century Italian Art* (June 28 – September 18, 1949), exh. cat. (New York: MoMA, 1949), 5.

43

Raffaele Bedarida, "Operation Renaissance: Italian Art at MoMA, 1940-1949", *Oxford Art Journal* 35, no. 2 (2012): 149.

44

Alfred H. Barr and James Thrall Soby, *Twentieth-century Italian Art*, 10.

45

It is important to note that an exhibition dedicated to *Cavaliere Azzurro* was hosted in the German Pavilion.

I Fauves and Matisse: the French Pavilion as an Ideal Extension of the Giardini Central Palace

The exhibition *I Fauves* took place in 1950, at a moment of critical rediscovery of these artists. Between the end of the 1940s and the beginning of the 1950s, the international scene had reconsidered their merits as epigones of Impressionism and as forerunners of abstraction. The Biennale's historical narrative anticipated Alfred H. Barr's essay *Matisse, His Art and His Public* (1951) and the *Les Fauves* retrospective exhibition organised by the MoMA in 1952; it followed the Bern Kunsthalle exhibition *Die Fauves und die Zeitgenossen*, whose organisational process was interwoven with the Venetian show, through the director of the Swiss art gallery Arnold Rüdlinger. As explained by Rodolfo Pallucchini, Rüdlinger decisively contributed to the success of the Biennale's project,⁴⁶ which had suffered delays during the loans' requests stage:

Mr. Rüdlinger from the "Kunsthalle" in Bern has decided, without our prior knowledge, to organise an exhibition of the "Fauves" in April. However, we had previously been in contact with him, and it was mutually agreed that the exhibition of the "Fauves" organised by the Biennale would later be held in Bern, with an additional selection of artworks. Conversely, Mr. Rüdlinger has opted to bring forward his exhibition for a variety of reasons. This situation naturally explains why some Swiss collectors have not yet responded to us. Nonetheless, Mr. Rüdlinger assures us that we will be able to obtain the paintings in time for the Biennale.⁴⁷

Besides the director of the Kunsthalle of Bern, the curatorial committee also included Georges Duthuit and Denys Sutton. The French art historian, who in 1949 published the controversial volume *Les Fauves*,⁴⁸ investigated the criteria for the selection of artworks in a letter to Pallucchini.⁴⁹ Asking whether the avant-garde's origins, "if not obscure, at least somewhat muddled", would be considered, he was disappointed to hear that the Biennale could not count on the loan of masterpieces by Matisse from Copenhagen and the Barnes Foundation. Months after the opening of the Biennale, Denys Sutton pointed out in *The Burlington Magazine* that the Italian Pavilion had finally drawn "attention to one of the most interesting, if underestimated, artistic movements of modern times".⁵⁰

Even if the Fauves were not widely appreciated by their contemporaries, there were public institutions who immediately recognised their potential: an example is Andry Farcy, director of the Musée des Beaux-Arts de Grenoble, who strongly supported the group. Longtime friend of these artists, he ran the "first French museum to exhibit the works of the "Fauves", more than fifteen years before other public collections in France".⁵¹ This local institution, "in this case a designated lender",⁵² seized the opportunity to contribute to the international rediscovery of this European avant-garde, unlike more prestigious museums, such as the Louvre, which did not guarantee their loans.

46

Pallucchini, "Introduzione alla XXV Biennale", xvi.

47

ASAC, Fondo Storico, Arti Visive, b. 21, Corrispondenza con i Commissari-Fauves, Georges Duthuit: letter from Rodolfo Pallucchini to Georges Duthuit, March 24, 1950.

48

Georges Duthuit, *Les Fauves. Braque, Derain, Van Dongen, Dufy, Friesz, Manguin, Maquet, Matisse, Puy, Vlaminck*, (Geneve: Editions des trois collines, 1949).

49

ASAC, Fondo Storico, Arti Visive, b. 21, Corrispondenza con i Commissari-Fauves, Georges Duthuit: letter from Georges Duthuit to Rodolfo Pallucchini, November 26, 1949.

50

Denys Sutton, "Fauves", *The Burlington Magazine* 92, no. 570 (September 1950): 263.

51

ASAC, Fondo Storico, Arti Visive, b. 21, Varie, Musées des Beaux-Arts de Grenoble: letter from Musée de Grenoble (Andry Farcy) to Rodolfo Pallucchini, March 28, 1950.

52

Ibid.

fig. 3
Twenty-fifth Venice Art Biennale. Display of the Matisse's solo exhibition in the French Pavilion. Archivio Storico della Biennale di Venezia, ASAC, Fototeca, Attualità e allestimenti, A.V.54. 1950. 38. Image courtesy of Archivio Storico della Biennale di Venezia, ASAC.



Matisse's solo exhibition, displayed in the French Pavilion of the Giardini, represented an ideal extension of the Fauvist retrospective in the Palazzo Centrale. At that time, Matisse's most recent production was largely unknown in Italy, and the Biennale wished to offer a complete overview of his artworks, including sculptures from the beginning of the 20th century [fig. 3], such as *Madeleine* (1901), *La Serpentine* (1909), or *Large Seated Nude* (1923-1925). Furthermore, in 1950 the artist shared the crowning achievement of the "Premio Presidenza del Consiglio dei Ministri" (Award of the Presidency of the Council of Ministers) with Ossip Zadkine; this fact aroused the wrath of Giorgio De Chirico, who wrote a public letter condemning the choice to the director of *Il Nazionale*.⁵³

After the closure of the Venice Biennale, Matisse's solo exhibition was held in Milan and Rome, where it inaugurated the programming of the Fondazione Premi Roma, with some slight changes in the selection of the artworks.⁵⁴ Rodolfo Pallucchini was commissioned to present the show in the catalogue at the behest of Giovanni Sangiorgi.⁵⁵ The relevance of this preface⁵⁶ lies on the explanation the scholar gave for the delay with which Matisse and the Fauves were rediscovered in Italy, thus affirming the importance of the joint programming between France and Italy for the 25th Biennale:

I am fully aware that many Italians, who had never seen Matisse's paintings except in reproductions, were somewhat taken aback by the canvases exhibited last summer at the Biennale. [...]

The academy, which continually renews itself under increasingly specious labels, and the modernist polemic [...] both contribute to delaying the comprehension of certain facts that are so eloquent for those familiar with the masters of the past.

Was it not perhaps entirely justified to speak of "atonement", as some have done, when it was only in 1950 that the Italian public, thanks to the Biennale, had the opportunity to see a hundred works by the "Fauves" together, and, owing to the French government's support, a room dedicated

⁵³

The following words appeared in *Il Nazionale*: "La Commissione della Biennale, di cui fanno parte due eminenti Storici d'Arte e Modernistologi, i professori Lionello Venturi e Roberto Longhi, oltre che premiare l'autore del soprariprodotta sgorbio, gli ha offerto nelle sale della *Biennale* lo spazio per ben due personali. La stessa Commissione ha rifiutato l'invito, anche per una sola opera, a nobilissimi e valentissimi artisti italiani." See Giorgio De Chirico, "Incompetenza ed esterolatria alla XXV Biennale", *Il Nazionale* 2, no. 44 (October 29, 1950): 3.

⁵⁴

Francesca Castellani, "'Posizione' di Matisse", *Saggi e Memorie di storia dell'arte*, vol. 35 (2011): 157.

⁵⁵

Draft letter in ASAC, Fondo Storico, Arti Visive, b. 21, Corrispondenza con Sangiorgi: annex to the letter from Rodolfo Pallucchini to Giovanni Sangiorgi, December 11, 1950.

⁵⁶

In 2011 Francesca Castellani examined the structure and content of Pallucchini's preface (see note 57): she highlighted how it was exemplary of his philological practice and critical thinking on modern art.

to Matisse? It is not that no Matisse works had been shown here before: in fact, thirty of his paintings were shown at the second exhibition of the Secessione Romana in 1914. But what has remained in our artistic culture, if not the cold memory of a catalogue? [...].⁵⁷

Two monographic Matisse exhibitions were preludes to the one set up in the French Pavilion in 1950. Curated by Jean Cassou, they took place in 1949 in Lucerne and Paris and showed respectively the evolution of the artist's production and the artworks he created in 1947 and 1948.⁵⁸ It might be assumed that the chief curator of the Musée d'Art Moderne de Paris, who joined the commission for *I Fauves*, also contributed to the Giardini exhibition that had been set up by Raymond Cogniat. As General Commissioner of the French Pavilion, Cogniat was the delegate of the foreign government in charge of the relations with the Biennale's decision-making committees. He was responsible for national programming and promoted historical-critical comparison between Italy and France;⁵⁹ however, he did not directly manage the logistics of the building because the French Pavilion was still at that time "the only foreign pavilion of Italian ownership, as France has never wished to purchase it".⁶⁰

The Italian Pavilion as a Space for Discussion on Cubism and Futurism

While the Fauves retrospective exhibition occupied a larger area of the main hall in the Palazzo Centrale, the *Quattro Maestri del Cubismo* [fig. 4], and *I firmatari del primo manifesto futurista* were, as noted above, juxtaposed in two narrower rooms. This solution fostered the critical comparison between the French and Italian avant-garde phenomena, recalling the Parisian playing field where they arose and grew to prominence. In this way, the 25th Venice Biennale made it possible to rediscover Futurism's role in the development of modern art: visitors could question the assumption that restricted its revolutionary cultural impact within the national borders and grasp its mutual influences with Cubism. Giulio Carlo Argan underlined this aspect in *The Burlington Magazine* and emphasised Italy's first attempt to actively contribute to European avant-garde:

fig. 4

Twenty-fifth Venice Art Biennale. The exhibition display of the *Quattro maestri del Cubismo*. Archivio Storico della Biennale di Venezia, ASAC, Fototeca, Attualità e allestimenti, A.V.52.1950.62. Image courtesy of Archivio Storico della Biennale di Venezia, ASAC.



57

ASAC, Fondo Storico, Arti Visive, b. 21, Corrispondenza con Sangiorgi: annex to the letter from Rodolfo Pallucchini to Giovanni Sangiorgi, December 11, 1950.

58

Jean Cassou, Aloïs Troller and Hanspeter Landolt, *Henri Matisse* (July 9 – October 2, 1949), exh. cat. (Lucerne: Musée des Beaux-Arts, 1949); Jean Cassou, *Henri Matisse. Œuvres récentes, 1947-1948* (June – September 1949), exh. cat. (Paris: Musée National d'Art Moderne, 1949).

59

ASAC, Fondo Storico, Paesi, b. 12, Francia, Corrispondenza con il Prof. Raymond Cogniat: letter from Rodolfo Pallucchini to Raymond Cogniat, January 16, 1950.

60

ASAC, Fondo Storico, Paesi, b. 12, Francia, Corrispondenza con il Prof. Raymond Cogniat: letter from Rodolfo Pallucchini to Raymond Cogniat, March 1, 1950.

If Futurism refuses to confront the problem of form with the same clarity and objectivity that Cubism does, this is chiefly due to the fact that Italy lacked a modern artistic tradition. Whereas Cubism sets out systematically to revise traditional values, and aims deliberately at extracting from impressionist ideology just what was still required, Futurism aims at the indiscriminate destruction of all tradition, at detaching itself from the history of art by wholehearted participation in contemporary life.⁶¹

Moving from room V to VI, the public could grasp the diverse cultural atmospheres that characterised the development of each avant-garde and led to their distinct aesthetic solutions: the Futurist experience of modernity, passionate and polemical, the Cubist's more rational and Cartesian.⁶² Moreover, for the first time in the Biennale's postwar era, these French-Italian retrospective exhibitions made it possible to face up to Futurism's problematic fascist spectre: a fair historical distance had been achieved to re-examine the movement in terms of its most authentic values.⁶³

The curatorial choice of both organising committees to focus only on the initiators of the movements further strengthened the dialogue between Cubism and Futurism. Since November 1949, Daniel-Henry Kahnweiler and Rodolfo Pallucchini have discussed the selection criteria for the French artworks.⁶⁴ The former pondered whether to consider only the "heroic years", as had been done in the volume for which he had written the foreword which Braun would publish in 1950, or to include artists who had only been Cubists temporarily. In the end, the commission preferred to focus on painting and narrow the time frame to 1908-1914: this meant concentrating exclusively on the protagonists of the French avant-garde.⁶⁵ Similarly, the Futurist retrospective was restricted to the artists who signed the First Manifesto, mainly to ensure a balanced display; this choice inevitably led to exclusions that were not ignored by the press.⁶⁶

Margherita Sarfatti was one of the collectors who lent Italian masterpieces, and she guaranteed the loan of Luigi Russolo's *Solidità della nebbia* (1912). The letter that Rodolfo Pallucchini wrote to her in March 1950 clarifies why the Italian 20th century avant-garde was represented by Futurism that year and how this preference was in line with the Biennale's programme of 1948:

But you now clearly express the reason behind your dissatisfaction with the Biennale: namely, that the Committee did not select the Italian Novecento movement for a retrospective exhibition.

Allow me to respond directly: it seems to me that, before the Novecento, there were Metaphysical painting and the Futurists. In 1948, we featured the Metaphysical artists, and this year, we are showcasing the Futurists. [...] This represents a rotational selection of exhibitions rather than a stance against you or the Novecento. Additionally, several members of our Committee have been involved in the same movement.⁶⁷

61

Giulio Carlo Argan, "Futurism", *The Burlington Magazine* 92, no. 570 (September 1950): 265-266.

62

Garibaldo Marussi, "La Sistemazione del Futurismo tra Fauves e Cubisti", *Fiera Letteraria Roma*, July 23, 1950.

63

Apollonio, "I firmatari del primo manifesto futurista", 57.

64

ASAC, Fondo Storico, Arti Visive, b. 20, Corrispondenza con i commissari e gli artisti – Cubismo, Daniel-Henry Kahnweiler: letter from Daniel-Henry Kahnweiler to Rodolfo Pallucchini, November 9, 1949; letter from Daniel-Henry Kahnweiler to Rodolfo Pallucchini, January 5, 1950.

65

ASAC, Fondo Storico, Arti Visive, b. 20, Corrispondenza con i commissari e gli artisti – Cubismo, Daniel-Henry Kahnweiler: letter from Rodolfo Pallucchini to Daniel-Henry Kahnweiler, January 17, 1950.

66

Alfredo Mezio, "I futuristi al Museo", *Il mondo*, July 1, 1950.

67

ASAC, Fondo Storico, Arti Visive, b. 20, Corrispondenza con i prestatori – Futurismo, Margherita Sarfatti: letter from Rodolfo Pallucchini to Margherita Sarfatti, March 18, 1950.

The other masterpieces in room VI mostly belonged to American private and public collections.⁶⁸ Besides the above-mentioned example of *Hiéroglyphiques dynamiques du Bal Tabarin*, whose loan was reluctantly granted because of its precarious condition, MoMA authorised the transportation of *Les Funérailles de l'anarchiste Galli* (1911)⁶⁹ by Carlo Carrà to Europe. The Biennale consolidated its relationships with the United States mainly thanks to the collaboration of James Thrall Soby with the other commissioners involved in the Futurist exhibition. His presence, together with the participation of Jean Cassou in the *Quattro Maestri del Cubismo*'s committee, allows us to put in dialogue the supranational narrative of the Biennale's retrospective exhibitions with those of the aforementioned *Twentieth-century Italian art* and the 1950 *Exposition d'art moderne italien* in Paris,⁷⁰ that contributed to the canonisation of Italian modern art abroad in the postwar years. By exposing a selection of works of Italian artists, they both addressed the problematic reception of Futurism and considered its development in relation to Cubism, as was also done by the Venetian exhibition. When Pallucchini was informed by Cassou of the Musée National d'Art Moderne's project, he welcomed the news, guaranteeing institutional support:

Personally, I greatly prefer that such events take place through foreign initiatives rather than being organised by the Biennale, as envisaged by Italian law. We are still too close to the period when, under Fascism, the Biennale organised exhibitions abroad with a political connotation. I believe it is far preferable for the understanding of Italian art that they take place through initiatives such as those of the Museum of Modern Art in New York, the Palais des Beaux-Arts in Brussels, and the Musée d'Art Moderne in Paris.⁷¹

Significantly, those organised by the Biennale were not the only foreign exhibitions promoted by the fascist government. In 1939 Italy took part in two universal expositions held in America, San Francisco's *Golden Gate International Exposition* and the *New York World's Fair*.⁷² In the former, Longhi e Argan, under the supervision of Minister Giuseppe Bottai, chose to exclude Futurism to ensure greater stylistic coherence of the exhibition;⁷³ conversely, in New York, the avant-garde was presented but with a "minor profile",⁷⁴ as evidenced by the absence of reviews. Ten years later, Alfred Barr and James Thrall Soby contextualised Italian modernism inside the international scene: they mainly devoted critical texts to the analysis of early Futurism and Scuola Metafisica, although they also exhibited painting and sculpture from the 1920s to younger abstractionists.

Futurism and Metafisica were also the protagonists of the narrative conceived for the *Exposition d'art moderne italien*, which opened in May 1950. The event coincided with the publication of the *Cahiers d'Art*'s monographic issue

68

"Cronache Venezia. La Mostra Storica del Futurismo", *Emporium* 56, no. 5 (May 1950): 228.

69

ASAC, Fondo Storico, Arti Visive, b. 20, Corrispondenza con i prestatori – Futurismo, Museum of Modern Art: letter from Dorothy C. Miller to Giovanni Ponti, March 7, 1950.

70

The *Exposition d'art moderne italien*, organised under the auspices of the Association Française d'Action Artistique and with the high patronage of the French and Italian Governments, was held at the Musée National d'Art Moderne in Paris from May to June 1950.

71

ASAC, Fondo Storico, Paesi, b. 12, Francia, Corrispondenza con il Prof. Jean Cassou: letter from Rodolfo Pallucchini to Jean Cassou, February 15, 1950.

72

The two exhibitions, respectively, took place in San Francisco (Treasure Island: 1939-1940) and New York (Flushing Meadows, Queens: 1939-1940).

73

Flavio Fergonzi, "Périodiser l'art italien du XXe siècle", *Perspective*, no. 4 (2008): 738.

74

Raffaele Bedarida, "Export/Import: The Promotion of Contemporary Italian Art in the United States 1935-1969" (PhD diss., Graduate Center City University of New York, 2016), 56, https://academicworks.cuny.edu/gc_etds/736/, accessed November 2024.

dedicated to Italian art by Christian Zervos.⁷⁵ As preparations for the Biennale were being finalised, the French and Italian governments collaborated on this cultural project, supported by the Association Française d'Action Artistique and the Amici di Brera: the exhibition adopted a historical perspective that considered the cultural premises of the late 19th century in its catalogue and presented Italian artworks from 1910 to 1930.⁷⁶ Following intentions expressed by Cassou to Pallucchini, particular emphasis was placed on Futurism, whose impact in France was re-evaluated.⁷⁷

Transnational Perspectives to Investigate Modern Art: AICA and the Venice Art Biennale

In 1950, the Biennale's three retrospective exhibitions hosted in the main hall of the Palazzo Centrale demonstrated that, from a museographic perspective, it was possible to adopt a transnational approach to investigate French and Italian avant-garde artists. The exhibition's narrative introduced a topic that the Association Internationale des Critiques d'Art (AICA) would debate in the following years: the balance between national and transnational forces that animated the modernist koine.⁷⁸

In 1948, several European and non-European art historians rebuilt the network of relations interrupted by the two world wars, inaugurating the AICA's First International Congress under the aegis of UNESCO⁷⁹. Experts who also joined the Venice Biennale organising commissions included Paul Fierens, Lionello Venturi, Raymond Cogniat, James Johnson Sweeney, Herbert Read, Jean Cassou, and Denys Sutton. In 1950 Venice hosted the AICA's Second General Assembly at the proposal of Cogniat. He was convinced that, despite its administrative nature, the meeting might represent an excellent opportunity for Italy and France:⁸⁰ the association's members would visit the Biennale and, consequently, the Giardini's retrospective exhibitions.

In 1949 and 1953 respectively, the AICA Second International Congress and Fifth General Assembly laid the groundwork for the 1960 International Congress, which finally interrogated the supranational character of modernism. The first one, held in Paris, investigated the relationship between art and modern lifestyles, underlining people's struggle to comprehend modern art and an attendant urgency to define the role of the critics.⁸¹ Four years later, in Dublin, the issue of centralising the documentation on contemporary art trends was addressed: the Archives de l'Art Contemporain were established and annual collection documentation promoted to improve them⁸²; far-reaching research into 20th century art would be carried out, starting with Cubism and Futurism under the leadership of Francastel and Argan.⁸³

75

For further discussion, see: Erica Bernardi, "Franco Russoli - Fernanda Wittgens. Le prime lettere tra Pisa, Milano e Parigi", *Concorso. Arti e lettere*, no. 6 (2012-2014): 53-63; Massimo Maiorino, "Parigi 1950. Dalla Francia l'Arte italiana tra Cahiers d'Art ed Exposition d'Art Moderne", *Incontri* 35, no. 1 (2020): 68-82.

76

Jean Cassou and Paolo D'Ancona, *Exposition d'art moderne italien* (May 12 – Juin 11, 1950), exh. cat. (Paris: Musée National d'Art Moderne, 1950).

77

ASAC, Fondo Storico, Paesi, b. 12, Francia, Corrispondenza con il Prof. Jean Cassou: letter from Jean Cassou to Rodolfo Pallucchini, February 10, 1950.

78

Septième Congrès International de l'AICA, Minutes of plenary sessions, (September 6-13, 1960) Warsaw, Krakow.

79

Denys Sutton, "The First International Congress of Art Critics", *College Art Journal* 8, no. 2 (1948-1949): 129-135.

80

ASAC, Fondo Storico, Paesi, b. 12, Francia: Corrispondenza con il Prof. Raymond Cogniat: letter from Raymond Cogniat to Rodolfo Pallucchini, February 6, 1950.

81

Deuxième Congrès International de l'AICA, Minutes of plenary sessions, (June 27-July 1, 1949) Paris.

82

Cinquième Assemblée Générale de l'AICA, Minutes of the third session, (July 20-27, 1953) Dublin, 4.

83

Ibid.

Finally, before the Seventh International Congress, the AICA met in Naples and Palermo, where the main topics discussed concerned the methodology and vocabulary adopted by critics, but also the combined and reciprocal influences of “everyday life and the value of forms”.⁸⁴

In 1960, based on these earlier debates, the members gathered in Poland to open the first AICA International Congress ever organised in Eastern Europe; they sought to analyse the complex dynamics that shaped modern art trends in their national and universalistic dimensions. For these reasons, three sessions were conceived and dedicated to *Modern Art as an international phenomenon*; *Modern Art as an outcome and expression of diverse national traditions and tendencies*; *Modern Art and perspectives of the development of the art of different peoples*.⁸⁵

To address these matters, the president of the first session, Jacques Lassaigne, suggested examining the concept of unity in modern art: it was necessary to figure out whether it should be intended as “unity in language, function, issues, and unity of historical process”.⁸⁶ Furthermore, the AICA’s commissioners had to question the extent to which national experiences transcended their original reality by participating in the development of modern art. National identities were inevitably compared with each other through an international figurative language but, as Jean Cassou⁸⁷ stated, at the origin of any expressive form, there was the creative universe of an artist, that had “his personal existence, destiny, guiding star, temperament, language, and culture”.⁸⁸ Thus, it became inevitable to re-examine the concept of “international style”, considering how mass media largely contributed to strengthen relations between contemporary artists, critics, and art historians. During the second session of the congress, Giulio Carlo Argan provoked his colleagues by asking:

Does this international character stem from a certain universality, from a non-historical nature of modern art, or does it depend on a synthesis of national traditions and tendencies? Furthermore, if we agree that the character of art depends on a synthesis of the traditions and tendencies of different peoples — what do the terms “tradition” and “tendency” truly signify? What do they mean? And above all, what gives art its national character — is it genuinely a historical tradition or rather a contemporary situation?⁸⁹

To respond to and stimulate the debate, he quoted extracts from the report by the art critic Michel Ragon, who was not able to attend the meeting. He underlined that in contrast with the 19th century artworks exhibited in academic salons, all depicting the same scenes similarly worldwide, Cubism, Futurism and Expressionism all had a specific national character, one granted by the gravitation of current reality on the historical past and not by its contrary.⁹⁰ According to Ragon, these examples might explain how modern art could exist, at the same time, through unity and diversity, internationalisation and folklore.⁹¹

84

Sixième Congrès International de l'AICA, Minutes of plenary sessions, (September 16-22, 1957) Naples, Palermo.

85

Septième Congrès International de l'AICA.

86

Ibid., 11.

87

The French art historian could not physically attend the AICA’s Seventh International Congress. He was in charge of the curatorship of the exhibition *Les sources du XXe siècle: les arts en Europe de 1884 à 1914*, promoted by the Council of Europe. Held in 1960 at the Musée d’Art Moderne de Paris, this event aimed to rediscover the humanist spirit that animated the European cultural panorama in the years before the outbreak of the World War I.

88

Septième Congrès International de l'AICA, 13.

89

Ibid., 41.

90

Ibid.

91

Ibid.

These considerations by AICA on the universalistic and individual dimension of modern art trends appear to be validated by the historical narratives that Carlo Scarpa, together with the Commission for Figurative Art, developed for the main hall of the Palazzo Centrale ten years earlier. The resourceful cooperation between France and Italy had succeeded in conveying the dynamism of the early 20th century artistic panorama and, as highlighted by the art historian Garibaldo Marussi, the avant-garde phenomena's different approaches to universal problems.⁹²

92

Marussi, "La Sistemazione del Futurismo tra Fauves e Cubisti".

Author's Biography

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	Industrial Transnationalism at the 44th Venice Biennale: Reinhard Mucha's <i>Das Deutschlandgerät</i> (The Germany Device) Althea Ruoppo Abstract In 1990, Reinhard Mucha, together with the photographer duo Bernd and Hilla Becher, was West Germany's representative at the 44th Venice Biennale. With his site-specific installation, <i>Das Deutschlandgerät</i>, Mucha drew attention to a striking parallel between the long manufacturing histories of his native Rhine-Ruhr region of western Germany and the Veneto region of northern Italy. This paper contends that <i>Das Deutschlandgerät</i> reveals the artist's development of an industrial transnational approach to artmaking. Through the medium and strategy of sculptural assemblage, Mucha treated the West German Pavilion of the Federal Republic as a space of intercultural encounter in which two post-industrial societies could converge both conceptually and materially. In 2002, and again in 2021, the artist adapted this project for its permanent display in the Kunstsammlung Nordrhein-Westfalen's grand neo-Renaissance building, K21 Ständehaus, effectively bringing two distinct but related regions in Germany and Italy into dialogue twice more. Keywords Reinhard Mucha, <i>Das Deutschlandgerät</i>, Assemblage, Industrial transnationalism, West German Pavilion, Venice Biennale		
OBOE Journal On Biennials and Other Exhibitions ISSN 2724-086X obojournal.com	Published online: December 31, 2024 To cite this article: Althea Ruoppo, "Industrial Transnationalism at the 44th Venice Biennale: Reinhard Mucha's <i>Das Deutschlandgerät</i> (The Germany Device)", <i>OBOE Journal</i> 5, no. 1 (2024): 96-117. To link to this article: https://doi.org/10.25432/2724-086X/5.1.0008		

Industrial Transnationalism at the 44th Venice Biennale: Reinhard Mucha's *Das Deutschlandgerät* (The Germany Device)

Althea Ruoppo

Art may be treated like coal: Its practical value is not self-evident and certainly not at first glance.¹

In the summer of 1990, German sculptor Reinhard Mucha (born Düsseldorf, 1950) represented the Federal Republic of Germany at the 44th Venice Biennale with an expansive sculptural room installation titled *Das Deutschlandgerät* (The Germany Device) [fig. 1].² This paper argues that the work by Mucha should be seen as a foundational example of the artist's development of a German transnational sculptural aesthetic that is marked by his deep interest in industrial heritage.³ It displays Mucha's profound reverence for the common manufacturing history of his native Rhine-Ruhr region in the German state of North Rhine-Westphalia and an interest in finding a common ground with another post-industrial society in the Veneto region of northern Italy.⁴ Mucha, then, aims to present his audiences with a transnational view of former industrial landscapes from a holistic and comparative perspective of two distinct but related regions of the world.

1

Reinhard Mucha, letter to Reinhard Richter, Operations Manager of the Grimberg 3/4 Mine, 4709 Bergkamen-Oberaden, Pantenweg 6, February 13, 1991, in Reinhard Mucha, "Letters and Texts 1980–2021", in Reinhard Mucha, *Mucha: Holiday in Space / Urlaub im All* (Cologne: Walther and Franz Koenig Verlag, 2023), Volume 2: 339.

2

The work is now called *Das Deutschlandgerät*, *Kunstsammlung Nordrhein-Westfalen, K21 Ständehaus, Düsseldorf* [2021], [2002], *XLIV Biennale di Venezia, Deutscher Pavillon, Venedig 1990* (The Germany Device, North Rhine-Westphalia Art Collection, K21 Ständehaus, Düsseldorf [2021], [2002], 44th Venice Biennale, German Pavilion, Venice 1990). The installation's extensive title refers to its exhibition contexts (the North Rhine-Westphalia Art Collection in the former Ständehaus, Düsseldorf, Germany; and the German Pavilion at the 44th Venice Biennale, Venice, Italy) as well as its dates of creation (1990) and modification (2002 and 2021). According to Mucha's dating system, no brackets around the year indicate when an artwork was first made, while square brackets indicate when it was revised or adapted. For the sake of clarity, hereafter I refer to this installation simply as *Das Deutschlandgerät*.

3

Mucha's engagement with industrial transnationalism is not a distinctly German strategy. One could make a similar argument for artists from other countries who have explored the subjects and materials of industrial cultures and nations and/or probed similarities between them, including the Canadian Edward Burtynsky (1955), the British Jeremy Deller (1966–) and Bill Woodrow (1948–), the Czech Josef Koudelka (1938–) and the Indian Prabhakar Pachpute (1986–).

4

The study of industrial heritage and deindustrialization processes in the late 20th century in a global perspective is a relatively new field. My analysis is aided by recent work by scholars of urban and environmental studies and social history, including Alice Mah, Donald K. Carter, Stefan Berger, Christian Wicke, Jana Golombek, and Stefano Musso.

fig. 1

Reinhard Mucha
Das Deutschlandgerät, XLIV
Biennale di Venezia,
Deutscher Pavillon, Venedig
1990 (partial view)
The Germany Device, XLIV
Biennale di Venezia, German
Pavilion, Venice 1990
 Multi-part sculptural room
 installation
 Installation view, La Biennale di
 Venezia (German Pavilion
 with Bernd and Hilla Becher),
 Venice 1990
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 2025
 Photo Heiner Wessel
 Courtesy the Artist and Sprüth
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 behalf of VG Bild-Kunst and
 muchaArchive.



The following analysis will show how various national cultures and societies are inextricably linked and mutually implicated in Mucha's work. It will deliberately combine the terms German—which designates artworks that specifically refer to the history and culture of Germany—and transnational—used to describe sculptures that bring together identifiable forms and subject matter that relate to two or more nations. My use of the latter designation primarily draws on art historian Caroline Jones's definition of the prefix "trans", which is used "to cut across or dissolve [the borders of nation states], even as it depends on their infrastructures". For Jones, the trans "can be regional, hemispheric or global; what is consistent is that it seeks to chart a vector across national or international circuits of exchange, establishing alternative relations".⁵ Rather than seeking to identify a definitive "German" aesthetic in Mucha's *Das Deutschlandgerät*, the aim is to evaluate the artist's sculptural installation in terms of its national *and* international character.⁶ His treatment of the German transnational is a result of the medium and strategy of assemblage: a three-dimensional artwork comprised of a variety of seemingly incompatible elements that are drawn from diverse contexts.⁷ Mucha's

5

When Jones coined the notion of "trans-objects" to describe global artworks created since the 1960s by artists who are acutely aware of polarities between their national/cultural identity and universalist ambitions, she used the term almost exclusively in relation to Brazilian artists Lygia Clark and Hélio Oiticica. See Caroline Jones, "Transnational Openings", in *The Global Work of Art: World's Fairs, Biennials, and the Aesthetics of Experience* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2017), 153-155.

6

James Hodkinson and Benedict Schofield have demonstrated that the question of how one can define and evaluate the local particularities and qualities of a specifically German-language culture within a globalized public sphere is inevitably fraught. Still, Elisabeth Herrmann, Carrie Smith-Prei, and Stuart Taberner have argued that we can avoid what Ulrich Beck has termed "methodological nationalism" by holding nation and world in tension with one another. See James Hodkinson and Benedict Schofield (eds.), *German in the World: The Transnational and Global Contexts of German Studies* (Rochester: Camden House, 2020); Elisabeth Herrmann, Carrie Smith-Prei, and Stuart Taberner (eds.), *Transnationalism in Contemporary German-Language Literature* (Rochester, New York: Boydell & Brewer, 2015), 2.

7

Although the term assemblage dates from the early 1950s, when the French artist Jean Dubuffet (1901-1985) referred to his collages of butterfly wings as "*assemblages d'empreintes*", the technique has roots in the early twentieth century, particularly in Cubist collage and Dada's readymades. This art form gained greater recognition thanks to the Museum of Modern Art's survey exhibition *The Art of Assemblage* in 1961. Following the Hirshhorn Museum's 2006 exhibition *The Uncertainty of Objects and Ideas: Recent Sculpture* and the New Museum's *Unmonumental: The Object in the 21st Century* a year later, several scholars have emphasised the centrality of sculptural assemblage in the work of international artists.

specific interdisciplinary approach is called herein “industrial transnationalism”, a sculptural strategy in which the artist juxtaposes disparate everyday objects, industrial, and commercial materials, and cultural references and titles from divergent national contexts to draw parallels between two countries’ industrial cities or regions. Much of the artist’s work from the last thirty-five years interlaces references to some of the most important former manufacturing regions in the industrialised West, including Germany’s Rhine-Ruhr; northern Italy’s Piedmont, Veneto, and Lombardy regions; and the so-called American Rust Belt, confirming that *Das Deutschlandgerät* is a pivotal sculptural installation which epitomises the artist’s ongoing industrial transnational approach to artmaking.⁸

In 1990, curator Philip Monk stopped short of claiming *Das Deutschlandgerät*’s transnational character when he argued that the installation was a site of exchange, where two contexts, Düsseldorf and Venice, were “transposed”. “In presentation”, Monk argued, the conditions of “production [the site of the studio] and display [the site of the pavilion] intersect or, rather, each is buried in the other and their relations are obscured by the deliberate inversion of what is public and what is private”.⁹ For Monk, *Das Deutschlandgerät* demonstrates reciprocity between studio and pavilion, but these locations are ultimately masked by each other and imperceptible to the viewer.¹⁰ Contrarily, the article posits that Mucha created a dialogical exchange between two distinct and identifiable places. In 2018, art historian Graham Bader cited scholar and critic David Joselit’s article “Painting Beside Itself” (2009) in his discussion of how *Das Deutschlandgerät* and other assemblages by Mucha are “transitive”, non-autonomous, and conceptually expansive entities that belong to larger shared material and symbolic networks, from the railroad to electronic media.¹¹ Most recently, in a catalogue essay published to accompany the Kunstsammlung Nordrhein-Westfalen’s comprehensive retrospective exhibition of Mucha’s works from the past forty years, art historian Sebastian Egenhofer considered the work’s “spatialised memory”, or its commemoration of a geographic-historical reality spanning the German Empire to the Federal Republic of Germany.¹² *Das Deutschlandgerät* was variously called a “technical unit (much like a car battery)”, a “kind of memorial or monument”, a “three-dimensional collage”, a “topological and semantic network”, and a “constellation of site references”.¹³ The proposed interpretation of how Mucha’s work embodies interactions among industrial nations and cultures and their infrastructures of production engages with and expands upon these authors’ analyses of the complex system of relations at play in the artist’s sculptural installations.

8

Other sculptural installations by Mucha that fall under my category of the industrial transnational include *Mutterseelenallein* (All Alone) [2009], [1991] [1989] 1979; *The Wirtschaftswunder, To the People of Pittsburgh III* [2016] 1991; and *Insel der Seligen* (Island of the Blessed) [2024] 2016.

9

Philip Monk, “Transposed Contexts: Reinhard Mucha (1990)”, <http://www.philipmonk.com/reinhard-mucha-1990>, last accessed July 2024.

10

Monk’s essay, originally commissioned for the official publication that accompanied Mucha’s representation of West Germany at the 44th Venice Biennale, never appeared because it was the artist’s wish to have a single text in the standard biennale languages of publication: German, Italian, and English. See Monk, “Transposed Contexts”. Instead, two excerpts were published from Rolf Ostendorf’s *Eisenbahn-Knotenpunkt Ruhrgebiet: Die Entwicklungsgeschichte der Revierbahnen seit 1838* (Railway Junction in the Ruhr Area: The History of the Development of the District Railways since 1838) (Motorbuch-Verlag Stuttgart, 1979).

11

See Graham Bader, “Trains of Thought”, *Artforum* 56, no. 5 (January 2018): 188–197.

12

The Kunstsammlung Nordrhein-Westfalen in Düsseldorf staged *Der Mucha—Ein Anfangsverdacht* (The Mucha—An Initial Suspicion) (September 3, 2022–January 22, 2023) at its two locations, K20 and K21. This was the first major exhibition of Mucha’s work since 1987, when it was shown in the double solo exhibitions *Kasse beim Fahrer* in Bern and *Nordausgang* in Basel.

13

Sebastian Egenhofer, “Spatialized Memory: Reinhard Mucha, *Das Deutschlandgerät*, [2021], [2002] 1990”, in Susanne Gaensheimer and Falk Wolf (eds.), *Der Mucha: Ein Anfangsverdacht* (Munich: Hirmer Verlag, 2022), 169–183.

The transnational has become a dominant paradigm in German Studies, radically expanding and enriching the field beyond its traditional, national roots.¹⁴ However, the concept of transnationalism has most often been used as an analytical tool in the reading of German literature, comics, film, and music.¹⁵ By questioning the interpretive limits of the term, the article sets forth a more comprehensive understanding of transnational production by a postwar German-born sculptor. At the same time, the emphasis on assemblage as a transnational art form expands upon previous studies of contemporary sculpture and offers a theoretical framework for examining artworks that reflect the complex entanglements of multiple geo-political, cultural, social, and economic settings.¹⁶ This approach to Mucha's works offers a model for thinking about the complexities of place and belonging in contemporary global art. It seeks to bring forth new ways of understanding how international artists have found resonances with other nations in their cultural heritage.

Tracing the industrial transnational in sculptural assemblage deepens our understanding of the complexities of identity formation and self-representation during the Cold War and beyond. Mucha possesses a strong sense of belonging to Düsseldorf, the Rhine-Ruhr, and to Germany, and his works preserve strong bonds of affiliation with his city, region, and country. Though he does not deny his biography and cultural origins, at times he does move away from the constraints of an unequivocal German identity. For example, in an undated conversation with the art critic of a German magazine, Mucha pointed out other possibilities, explaining that his name was Polish: "Polish has been influenced by Slavic and Romance languages. The name Mucha is of Romance origins".¹⁷ Mucha seems to subvert questions of nationalism by looking at the non-German ancestry of his family name.¹⁸ He complicates biographical and cultural affiliation as a default means for one to define an artist or to frame their practice. In 2009, he told art critic Hans-Joachim Müller that "Making binding public statements about it would amount to nipping the questions my work poses to me in the bud".¹⁹ On one hand, *Das Deutschlandgerät's* "Germanness" seems to contradict its own transnationalism, while on the other it parallels the presence of the transnational in the work. This sculptural installation permits a consideration of how a postwar German artist can simultaneously conform to and exceed the strictures of their national identity.

14

See Konrad H. Jarausch, "From National to Transnational German Studies: Some Historical Reflections, 1977-2017", *German Studies Review* 39, no. 3 (2016): 493-503; and Celia Applegate and Frank Trommler, "The Project of German Studies: Disciplinary Strategies and Intellectual Practices", *German Studies Review* 39, no. 3 (2016): 471-492.

15

See Kirkland A. Fulk (ed.), *Sounds German: Popular Music in Postwar Germany at the Crossroads of the National and Transnational* (New York: Berghahn Books, 2021); Randall Halle, *German Film After Germany: Toward a Transnational Aesthetic* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2008); Christina Kraenzle and Julia Ludewig, "Transnationalism in German comics", *Journal of Graphic Novels and Comics* 11, no. 1 (2020): 1-9; and Elizabeth Nijdam, "Transnational Girlhood and the Politics of Style in German Manga", *Journal of Graphic Novels and Comics* 11, no. 1 (2019): 31-51.

16

Over the last twenty years, art historians have shown that the medium is fundamentally elastic and without fixed boundaries, but they have not identified the emergence of transnational sculpture or how it specifically relates to assemblage. See Martha Buskirk, *The Contingent Object of Contemporary Art* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2003); Judith Collins, *Sculpture Today* (London; New York: Phaidon Press, 2007); and Anna Moszynska, *Sculpture Now* (New York: Thames & Hudson, 2013). More recent studies have been limited to the ecological and ethical dimensions of sculptural assemblage. See Dan Adler, *Contemporary Sculpture and the Critique of Display Cultures: Tainted Goods* (New York: Routledge, 2019); Amanda Boetzkes, *Plastic Capitalism: Contemporary Art and the Drive to Waste* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2019); Jaimey Hamilton Faris, *Uncommon Goods: Global Dimensions of the Readymade* (Chicago: Intellect, 2013); and Gillian Whiteley, *Junk: Art and the Politics of Trash* (New York: I.B. Tauris, 2011).

17

Patrick Frey, "Reinhard Mucha—Connections", trans. Catherine Schelbert, *Parkett* 12 (1987), 115.

18

Germany's Rhine-Ruhr region has a growing middle class and a large working class as well as a sizeable group of immigrant laborers and their descendants (12%). The current immigrant community comes predominantly from Poland and the Mediterranean countries. See Linde Egberts, *Chosen Legacies: Heritage in Regional Identity* (New York: Routledge, 2017), 139.

19

Hans-Joachim Müller, "Raum und Zeit", *Monopol* (November 2009), 59. All translations are mine unless otherwise noted.

Das Deutschlandgerät in Venice, 1990

Mucha was selected, together with the photographer duo Bernd (German, 1931–2007) and Hilla Becher (German, 1931–2015), for the West German Pavilion of the Federal Republic in the summer of 1990, specifically because of his works' attachment to his place of residence and work. All three artists were chosen by commissioner Klaus Bußmann, director of the Westphalian State Museum of Art & Cultural History in Münster (1985–2004), together with Kasper König, organiser of Sculpture Project Münster.²⁰ In his introductory text for the general catalogue for the 44th Venice Biennale, *Dimensione Futuro: L'artista e lo spazio* (Dimensions of the Future: The Artist and Space), Bußmann explained his choice of artists that lived “in the same place, Düsseldorf...[and were] exposed to the decisive influence of the industrial culture of the Bundesland North Rheinland-Westphalia”.²¹

Despite Mucha's and the Bechers' strong attachments to the local, Bußmann acknowledged that “their artistic viewpoints are linked to traditions that abroad are perhaps not associated with German art, as Romanticism and Expressionism are”. “Nevertheless”, he wrote, “[they are] part of the legitimate inheritance of German Illusionism [...] which found forceful international expression in Bauhaus and *Neue Sachlichkeit* during the Twenties”.²² Meanwhile, in the brochure for the West German Pavilion, Bußmann noted that his selection was driven by an interest in artistic positions that dealt with architecture as well as the relationship between formal aesthetics and industrial purpose. He reiterated his belief that the resulting sculptural and photographic installations made the “great tradition of the New Objectivity of the 1920s fruitful for our present”.²³ The subjects and forms of the Bechers' and Mucha's works were undoubtedly influenced by the industrial architecture of their shared native region. Yet, it is limiting to suggest that these artists' projects only focused on the cultural and technological history of the Rhineland-Ruhr area and strictly recalled early 20th-century German photographic precedents like Karl Blossfeldt, Albert Renger-Patzsch, and August Sander.²⁴ Rather, their artistic practices equally respond to large parts of Western Europe and North America and resonate with the serial approach of contemporary Minimalism and Conceptual art.²⁵

In the West German Pavilion's side rooms, the Bechers' display of black-and-white photographs from their *Wassertürme* (Water Towers) (1960–1990)

20

Mucha had previously exhibited his work with the Bechers in a group show with another West German artist, Günther Förg (German, 1952–2013), at Luhring Augustine & Hodes Gallery, New York (November 19–December 20, 1986). In 1978, as a kind of tribute to the artist couple, Mucha had made a diptych consisting of two light boxes with two black-and-white large-format transparencies with the German word for photograph, *Foto*, superimposed on what are presumably details of the Bechers' pictures of industrial structures in Leipzig, Germany.

21

Klaus Bußmann, “German Federal Republic”, in Simonetta Rasponi (ed.), *Dimensione Futuro: L'artista e Lo Spazio: XLIV Esposizione Internazionale D'arte, La Biennale di Venezia; Catalogo Generale 1990* (Venice: Edizioni Biennale, 1990), 160.

22

Bußmann, “German Federal Republic”, 160.

23

Klaus Bußmann, “Reinhard Mucha: ‘Das Deutschlandgerät’ 1990”, in *XLIV Biennale Venedig 1990: Bernd und Hilla Becher, Reinhard Mucha: Deutscher Pavillon, 27. Mai bis 30. September* (Milan: n.p., 1990), n.p.

24

For an interdisciplinary and cross-cultural study of the formal and ideological links and divergences between industrial imagery in Germany and the United States in the 1920s and from the 1970s to 1990s, see Kim Sichel (ed.), *From Icon to Irony: German and American Industrial Photography* (Seattle and London: University of Washington Press, 1995).

25

The 2022–2023 traveling retrospective on Bernd and Hilla Becher shed light on how the artist couple developed their ideas in tandem with American sculptors like Carl Andre and Sol LeWitt, who collected their photographs. See Jeff L. Rosenheim, *Bernd & Hilla Becher* (New York: Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2022).

series extended beyond Germany in both content and message.²⁶ They exhibited not only examples from the built environment within their home country but also those from across Western Europe and the United States.²⁷ 340 prints were serially arranged in a grid of three rows of three in order to encourage the viewer to consider the photographs as typologies of comparable structures with the same functions, each with their own regional idiosyncrasies, resulting in what the Met's curator of photography, Jeff Rosenheim, has called a "sociological" perspective that allows one to distinguish the "individual" from the "family".²⁸ The duo's innovative formal arrangements juxtaposed single structures from many different countries, presenting a "global view of industrialisation" that pictures the transnational homogeneity of disappearing industrial architecture, from blast furnaces and winding towers to gas tanks and grain silos.²⁹

The Bechers' photographic account of the aesthetic relations between constituent parts of a series was mainly surface-level, however, because the two artists framed their subjects in a frontal manner that isolated them from their surrounding environments and freed them from any associative meaning. By contrast, Mucha's own contribution in the middle of the West German Pavilion's entrance hall brought a more detailed personal, historical, and geographical consciousness to bear on the materials at hand.³⁰ The artist installed a rectangular 5 x 8 meter inner chamber whose dimensions corresponded exactly to his primary studio space on the first floor of *Kölner Straße* (Cologne Street) 170, Oberbilk, Düsseldorf, where he has been working since 1981.³¹ Located a short walk from the city's main train station, the four-story stone and brick clad building is an architectural witness to the industrial history of a former working-class manufacturing district that is now home to an upscale residential neighborhood.³²

The memorial plaque above the building's mailboxes tells passersby that it first housed the main plant of a railway equipment and streetcar manufacturer called the *Düsseldorfer Eisenbahnbedarf AG* (Düsseldorf Railway Equipment Corp.), formerly *Carl Weyer & Co. Waggonfabrik* (Carl Weyer & Co. Carriage Factory), from 1861-1939, and then the piping systems manufacturer *Paul Kahle Rorleitungsbau* (Paul Kahle Pipeline Construction), from 1939-1980; the latter company's name and

26

Following their presentation at the Venice Biennale, the Bechers's photographs were shown in Germany and the United States, traveling to the *Kölnischer Kunstverein* ("Cologne Art Association"); the Carpenter Center for the Visual Arts at Harvard University; and the Cleveland Center for Contemporary Art.

27

Together the Bechers photographed over two hundred industrial plants and buildings in mainland Europe, taking pictures of structures in the Netherlands from 1961 to 1965; in France, Belgium, and Luxembourg after 1964; in England, Wales, and Scotland, after 1965; and in the United States after 1968. See Emma Lewis, "Bernd Becher and Hilla Becher: Water Towers 1972-2009", Tate, <https://www.tate.org.uk/art/artworks/bernd-becher-and-hilla-becher-water-towers-p81238>, last accessed July 2024.

28

Metropolitan Museum of Art, "Bernd & Hilla Becher: Metropolitan Museum tour with Jeff Rosenheim", Duration: 00:25:42, July 2022, <https://fraenkelgallery.com/conversations/watch/metropolitan-museum-tour-with-jeff-rosenheim>, last accessed July 2024.

29

Metropolitan Museum of Art, "Bernd & Hilla Becher: Metropolitan Museum tour with Jeff Rosenheim".

30

The Biennale's seven-member international jury (Gillo Dorfles, Jean-Christophe Amman, Richard Francis, Rudi Fuchs, Dieter Honisch, Catherine Millet, and Mark Rosenthal) gave Mucha a "special mention...for the rigour and precision of his work", and the Bechers the *Leone d'Oro* ("Golden Lion") in the category of sculpture "for the particular plasticity of their photographic work". See Simonetta Rasponi, "The Jury", in *Dimensione Futuro*, 9.

31

Hans-Joachim Müller, "Raum und Zeit", *Monopol* (November 2009), 48-63. Several reviews commented on the installation's massive scale and expense. See Michael Kimmelman, "ART VIEW: A Changed Biennale Remains the Same", *The New York Times*, June 10, 1990, <https://www.nytimes.com/1990/06/10/arts/art-view-a-changed-biennale-remains-the-same.html>, last accessed July 2024. The general catalogue confirms that the realization of *Das Deutschlandgerät* was "made possible thanks to the contribution of the Stiftung Kunst und Kultur of the Bundesland North Rheinland-Westphalia, Düsseldorf". See Rasponi, *Dimensione Futuro*, 160.

32

My thanks go to Jochen Arentzen for graciously accommodating my visit to Mucha's studio on March 21, 2022.

logo are found on the building's front and left façades. *Kölner Straße* 170 was also an important site for German popular culture. In conversation with Helga Meister, Mucha described it as a "special house, where the *Toten Hosen* [Dead Trousers, a punk rock band from Düsseldorf] had their office and some documenta participants came and went. *Tatort* [Crime Scene, a German crime series] was also filmed here".³³

Inside *Das Deutschlandgerät*'s inner chamber, Mucha positioned two red-cable extension reels and a red wooden desk with metal folding legs that he had found at the City Savings Bank in his wife's hometown in Lower Saxony (and also used himself for a while).³⁴ The interior room was sheathed in gray felt, a material that many critics have suggested refers to German artist and educator Joseph Beuys (1921-1986), who served as professor of monumental sculpture at the *Kunstakademie* Düsseldorf from 1961 to 1972.³⁵ However, Mucha has argued that this material "comes from childhood memories of shop windows in which coloured felt formed backdrops for merchandise displays resembling tiny theatres".³⁶ The artist placed, in rows of three, twenty-seven rectangular, glass-fronted aluminum vitrines on top of the felt walls [fig. 2]. Each case contained worn, reddish-brown pitch pine floorboards on which industrial administrative work had been carried out since ca. 1908 and on which Mucha worked between 1981 and 1990. Mucha assembled the planks in their previous horizontal arrangement.

The reverse of the sliding glass panels of each display case in *Das Deutschlandgerät*'s inner chamber features a system of brown-red and blue-gray alkyd enamel lines. These markings delineate the contours of the windows and doors in Mucha's studio rotated by 180 degrees, but they could also be read as the sections of parallel railway lines like those found across Germany. In 1994, Anna Moszynska reflected on possible formal connections between the Rhineland's industrial landscape and Mucha's choice of display method:

He reflects the geography of his own area, not only in the photographs which often feature in his exhibitions or installations, but also in the landscape references suggested by the shape of his recent vitrines. The greyness and horizontality of its format relates, albeit abstractly, to the flat lands of the industrially-worked terrain of the Nordrhein Westfalen district and to the grey, northern light of that part of Germany.³⁷

The German artist Martin Kippenberger (1953-1997) saw similar traces of the Rhineland in Mucha's use of colour that year:

He is German thoroughness personified, and in gray; he is really what [Konrad] Adenauer was in politics, but in art—always just thorough! German, too. And he doesn't make such clumsy references to history,

33

Helga Meister, "K 21: Mucha erklärt das Deutschlandgerät", *Westdeutsche Zeitung*, September 1, 2009, http://www.wz.de/nrw/duesseldorf/kultur/k-21-mucha-erklaert-das-deutschlandgeraet_aid-31330683, last accessed July 2024.

34

Jürgen Hohmeyer, "Unheimlich nach oben drücken", *Der Spiegel* 21 (1990): 215.

35

Roberta Smith, "Art in Review: Reinhard Mucha 'Collected: Recollected'", *Luhring Augustine, SoHo*, *New York Times*, October 29, 1993, <http://www.nytimes.com/1993/10/29/arts/art-in-review-220293.html>, last accessed July 2024. In a conversation with Hans-Joachim Müller in 2009, Mucha acknowledged comparisons to Beuys: "I have occasionally been compared to Beuys. And I do admire his work. Our common roots lie in an explicit artisnry. Beuys was a gifted artisan, down to the tiniest detail – we're similar in that respect. But I have always maintained a certain detachment. I don't like dependencies. Already at the academy, in Rinke's class, I saw how the Beuys class produced mainly followers. That's not my role, this master's role". See Müller, "Raum und Zeit", 50; 53.

36

Toby Kamps, "Reinhard Mucha", in Jonathan Rothfuss and Elizabeth Carpenter (eds.), *Bits & Pieces Put Together to Present a Semblance of a Whole: Walker Art Center Collections* (Minneapolis: Walker Art Center, 2005), 406.

37

Anna Moszynska, "Train Spotting with Reinhard Mucha", *Art Monthly* (March 1994), 9.

fig. 2

Reinhard Mucha
Das Deutschlandgerät, XLIV
Biennale di Venezia,
Deutscher Pavillon, Venedig
1990 (partial view)
The Germany Device, XLIV
Biennale di Venezia, German
Pavilion, Venice 1990
 Multi-part sculptural room
 installation
 Installation view, La Biennale di
 Venezia (German Pavilion
 with Bernd and Hilla Becher),
 Venice 1990
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 muchaArchive.



of coming to terms with German history [...] He presents that sense of color from West German history having grown up there in the '50s and '60s, and that's gray.³⁸

While *Das Deutschlandgerät's* vitrines express a literal and metaphorical attachment to German place, Mucha has written that his display cases more generally ask the question "Where am I?"³⁹ Indeed, the artist did not limit his frame of reference to his studio or to Germany but broadened it to speak directly to the local Venetian setting, in keeping with his "way of developing works on site and taking account of the space and its history".⁴⁰

Mucha's transnational approach was directly in line with the overall exhibition framework selected by the Italian art critic Giovanni Carandente (1920–2009), who served as director of the XLIV Venice Biennale: *Dimensione Futuro: L'artista e lo spazio* ("Dimensions of the Future: The Artist and Space").⁴¹ For this edition, Carandente sought a younger international generation and explored "the relationship that the artist establishes with the surrounding space".⁴² Many aspects of the exhibition spoke to the theme of transnationalism. For instance, when selecting artists for the national pavilions, some of the country commissioners

38

Gisela Capitain, *B. Gespräche mit Martin Kippenberger*, exh. cat. Museum Boijmans van Beuningen, Rotterdam (Ostfildern, Germany: Reihe Cantz, 1994), 25.

39

Mucha in a letter to unknown recipient, ****, signed R.M., trans. J.W. Gabriel and Fiona Elliott, October 2009.

40

Müller, "Raum und Zeit", 60–61.

41

Clarissa Ricci traces Italian art critic and historian Achille Bonito Oliva's introduction in 1993 of a more transnational approach to artistic display at the 45th Venice Biennale. See Clarissa Ricci, "From Obsolete to Contemporary: National Pavilions and the Venice Biennale", *Journal of Curatorial Studies* 9, no. 1 (2020): 8–39.

42

Forty-nine countries from five different continents participated. See Giovanni Carandente, "XLIV Esposizione Internazionale d'Arte Dimensione Futuro, The Artist and Space", in *Dimensione Futuro*, 16.

subverted questions of nationalism by looking beyond their traditional borders, marking the first time that artists at the Biennale exhibited in buildings that did not belong to their own countries. The Indian-born and British-trained Anish Kapoor represented his adopted country of Great Britain, for example, and a group of six young Soviet artists was shown in dialogue with American-born Robert Rauschenberg in the U.S.S.R.'s Pavilion.⁴³ Some country commissioners, like Linda Shearer representing the United States, questioned whether or not the U.S. selection of artists had “some quintessential ‘American’ element” or if their work was “legible from a global and truly international perspective”.⁴⁴ Reporting on *Dimensione Futuro* for *The New York Times*, Michael Kimmelman noted that an international conference was held in Venice at the same time as the Biennale opening and challenged the relevancy of hosting an exhibition organised around the idea of nation when definitions of national identity and style were becoming increasingly untenable.⁴⁵

In the Biennale's Arsenale location, Carandente staged a kind of “confrontation of artists” in two special sections of the exhibition.⁴⁶ The first, held in the Corderie, was a show titled *Aperto 90*, a multinational display of more than one hundred young artists from twenty-seven countries, including the binational collaboratives Readymades Belong to Everyone and the Border Art Workshop, collectives from New York and Paris and San Diego and Tijuana, respectively.⁴⁷ The second, called *Ambiente Berlin* (“Environment Berlin”), was a group satellite show mounted in the Central (Italian) Pavilion.⁴⁸ Conceived by Carandente at the suggestion of Kunstsammlung Nordrhein-Westfalen director Werner Schmalenbach in the summer of 1988, the exhibition displayed work by several international artists who had lived and worked in East and West Berlin since the mid-1960s. *Ambiente Berlin* brought together 129 works by German Berliners, “Berlin Italians” (Emilio Vedova, Giuseppe Spagnolo), “Dutch Berliners” (Armando), “Hungarian Berliners” (Laszlo Lakner), and “American Berliners” (Nancy and Edward Reddin-Kienholz). *Ambiente Berlin* spoke to cultural links between the city and the rest of the world; of a give-and-take between Berlin and non-German guests of the Artist in Residence Program of the *Deutscher Akademischer Austauschdienst* (“German Academic Exchange Service/DAAD”), which has brought foreign artists to the once-insular city since 1963. Reflecting on the impending unification of the city and of the two Germanies in his catalogue essay for *Dimensione Futuro: L'artista e lo spazio*, Jörn Merkert, then director of the Berlinische Galerie, asked “How much longer will it take until Berlin becomes englobed in a vast railway network for high-

43

Kapoor still held an Indian passport at the time of the Venice Biennale of 1990.

44

Linda Shearer, “Towards an “International” Perspective”, in *Dimensione Futuro*, 270.

45

Kimmelman, “ART VIEW: A Changed Biennale Remains the Same”.

46

In his statement for the 1988 Venice Biennale catalogue, Carandente uses the term “un confronto di artisti della contemporaneità” to describe his cross-cultural ambitions for the exhibition. See Giovanni Carandente, “La XLIII Esposizione Internazionale d'Arte. Il luogo degli artisti”, in *XLIII Esposizione Internazionale d'Arte. La Biennale di Venezia. Il luogo degli artisti* (Milan: Gruppo Editoriale Fabbri, 1988), 15.

47

Initiated by curators Achille Bonito Oliva and Harald Szeemann as part of the 39th Art Exhibition directed by Luigi Carluccio, *Aperto 80* was designed to explore the work of emerging artists and those whose national origins were not represented by permanent national pavilions. See La Biennale di Venezia, “Biennale Arte History – The 1980s”, <https://www.labiennale.org/en/history-biennale-arte>, last accessed December 2024.

48

Ambiente Berlin followed Carandente's 1988 *Ambiente Italia* exhibition in the Italian Pavilion, for which he invited eight foreign artists working or living in Italy to participate: Cy Twombly, Jan Dibbets, Markus Lüpertz, George D'Alema, Léon Gischia, Sebastian Matta, Niki de Saint Phalle, and Sol LeWitt. See Stefania Portinari, ““Dimensione futuro”. Il luogo degli artisti alle Biennali di Giovanni Carandente, nel 1988 e 1990”, in *Giovanni Carandente: Una vita per l'arte* (Milan: Silvana Editoriale, 2021), 128; and Clarissa Ricci, “La globalizzazione di Aperto”, in *Aperto / 1980 – 1993 La mostra dei giovani artisti della Biennale di Venezia* (Milan: Postmedia Books, 2022), 151.

speed Paris-Moscow trains and the European centre between East and West?”⁴⁹
“By Carandente’s estimation, *Ambiente Berlin* was “symbolic of the future, ‘greater’ Europe”.⁵⁰

Just as Carandente strove to organise an exhibition that both depicted Berlin as a cosmopolitan metropolis and revealed the intersections between foreign-born artists working there, Mucha intended to present a sculptural installation that evoked and juxtaposed local and global places at a time of heightened geopolitical changes. The artist determined the form of *Das Deutschlandgerät* in accordance with the spatial and pragmatic institutional prescriptions of the exhibition site. The installation was especially conceived for and with Venice in mind, with Mucha looking directly at the neo-classical architecture of the German Pavilion for inspiration. Writing in 2016 about the work’s presentation at the *Kunstsammlung Nordrhein-Westfalen* in Düsseldorf, Jan Verwoert argued that Mucha’s “large-scale installation is like a blend of a doge’s palace and a temple to West Germany”.⁵¹ The chamber’s four exterior enclosure walls were clad with 51 x 51 centimeter light-yellow laser-polished marble slabs, and as is always the case with Mucha’s work, this choice of material was deliberate. Indeed, writing more generally about the artist’s sculpture in 1985, Renate Puvogel observed, “Mucha locates objects that are particularly tied to a place and that characterise a place in order to make the impossibility of such a transplantation pictorially and almost painfully palpable in this purposefully elevated, new situation”.⁵² In Venice, Mucha went to great lengths to ensure the successful “transplantation” of stone. He strived to match that of the pavilion’s marble flooring, commissioning a Venetian architect’s office to search for the Italian quarry in Chiampo near Vicenza in the Veneto region from which the natural stone *Chiampo mandorlato giallognolo* was unearthed in the 1930s.⁵³ *Gewinnung in der Lagerstätte selbst (In-situ-Verfahren)* (Quarrying at the Deposit Itself (On-site Operation)) (1991), Mucha’s watercolour drawing of an open-pit mine and stone temple columns, verifies the importance he placed on retrieving the industrial material directly from the site.⁵⁴ His interest in gathering resources from Chiampo may have stemmed from the area’s local economy and infrastructure. Though predominantly known for its distinct 16th-century architecture by Andrea Palladio (1508-1580) and its production of gold jewelry, the province of Vicenza is one of the most industrialised areas in the Veneto region and has the greatest concentration of manufacturing companies. It is home to numerous marble, sulphur, copper, and silver quarries and steel and textile factories in Chiampo, Montebelluna, and Sovizzo.⁵⁵

49

Jörn Merkert, “Berlin Views and Perspectives”, in *Dimensione Futuro*, 73.

50

Carandente, “XLIV Esposizione Internazionale d’Arte Dimensione Futuro, The Artist and Space”, 15.

51

Jan Verwoert, “World Speaks Thing”, in Søren Grammel (ed.), *Manual No. 5: Reinhard Mucha* (Basel: Kunstmuseum Basel, 2016), n.p.

52

Renate Puvogel, “Pflicht und Kür: Denk-Modelle zwischen Skulptur und Architektur”, *Das Kunstwerk* 38 (December 1985): 55.

53

Hohmeyer, “Unheimlich nach oben drücken”, 213. In our email correspondence in January 2022, Frederike Klusmann (Visual Arts Department, Project Lead German Pavilion 2022, ifa (*Institute für Auslandsbeziehungen*)) and Martin Weigert (*cfk architetti venezia*) confirmed that the German Pavilion’s floor had only been replaced once, in 1993, following Hans Haacke’s methodical destruction of the marble pavement for his installation *Germania*. Haacke not only tore open the floor, but also smashed the remains of Mucha’s work. For her installation at the 59th Venice Biennale, *Relocating a Structure* (April 23–November 27, 2022), Maria Eichhorn again broke through the marble tiles, revealing brick and cement supports in the foundation. The German Pavilion’s four side rooms still have the original stone tiles from 1938.

54

See Reinhard Mucha, *Mucha: Holiday in Space / Urlaub im All* (Cologne: Walther and Franz Koenig Verlag, 2023), Volume 2: 224–225.

55

Along with the nearby regions of Lombardy and Emilia-Romagna in the northeastern part of the country, the Veneto is referred to as the “third Italy” to distinguish it from the “first Italy”, represented by the traditional triangle of heavy industry formed by the northwestern cities of Turin, Milan, and Genoa. See Bagnasco Arnaldo, *Tre Italie. La problematica territoriale dello sviluppo italiano* (Bologna: Il Mulino, 1977).

In its dialogue with the specific site housing it, Mucha's installation resembled Jenny Holzer's room-sized LED installations for the United States Pavilion. The first woman to represent the US at the Biennale, Holzer carved her trademark "truisms" – aphorisms written in five languages (English, Italian, French, German, Spanish) into alternating red and white Italian marble floor tiles. Peter Frank acknowledged the diamond pattern's suggestion of those of northern Italy's Romanesque churches, but failed to see Mucha's thoughtful considerations of Venice, calling his *Das Deutschlandgerät* "the most disappointingly vacant installation I (and a number of other observers) have ever seen from this very gifted artist, one of the leading figures in the new architecturally-oriented German sculpture".⁵⁶ Yet Holzer's bevy of carved messages and electronic signs in the US Pavilion, along with posters and T-shirts all over Venice, was meant to be immediate and accessible, while Mucha's marble room and vitrines, with their complexly interwoven references to place, require slow, contemplative deciphering. Reporting on Holzer's and Mucha's installations in September 1990, art critics Lars Nittve, C.H. van Winckel, and Mark Kremer declared that the two artists' projects appeared – through their rigorous attention to detail and to their individual sites at the Biennale – as though they were each part of the original United States and West German Pavilions, dating to 1930 and 1909, respectively.⁵⁷

Mucha's room within a room attempted to merge four distinct contexts – artwork and exhibition space, and German studio and Veneto region – through the symbiosis of materials in such a way that they formed an indissoluble, visible unity. The marble floor of the pavilion and the outer marble walls of Mucha's chamber came into immediate contact, thereby entering a mimetic relationship with one another. Writing in the catalogue that accompanied the exhibition in the West German Pavilion, Bußmann explained that "only a small groove interrupts the continuous courses of the interstices, which changes from horizontal to vertical".⁵⁸ Mucha removed a narrow channel of the pavilion's marble flooring and inserted the walls of his cell directly into the paving, just as he did with the second iteration of the work in Düsseldorf [fig. 3]. For an artist who is obsessed with precision and for whom every detail is potentially significant, the subtle distinction Mucha made between floor and wall is notable. By Jürgen Hohmeyer's estimation, the marble was "an offshoot of the same historical substance, it seems. But it is again marked as a foreign body by a depression in the ground all around it. Mucha sees it as if a child had pressed a plastic sand toy into the ground with a cake tin".⁵⁹ If the little groove incised in the floor around the inner room marked the chamber as an extraneous, detached entity, it also registered it as something that was a part of the West German Pavilion as an exhibition space. Hans-Joachim Müller observed the spatial gap as well, writing in *Die Zeit*: "Were it not for a narrow ditch, an open seam between the house and the ground, no one would suspect that the dark chamber was not part of the permanent fixtures".⁶⁰ Through its simultaneous spatial assimilation into the existing environment and its critical interruption of the existing order of the site,

56

Peter Frank, "Sculpture at the 1990 Venice Biennale", *Sculpture* (September/October 1990): 37. Frank admired the "force and sensitivity" that Mucha brought to his found objects and materials but found his vitrines to be "pompous and vacuous".

57

See Lars Nittve, "Money Talks", *Artforum* (September 1990), 132, <https://www.artforum.com/print/199007/lars-nittve-60654>, last accessed July 2024; C.H. van Winckel and Mark Kremer, "Reinhard Mucha: De opheffing van het kunstenaarschap en andere manoeuvres", *Metropolis M* (September 1990), 32. The Bavarian Pavilion, built in 1909, was renamed the German Pavilion in 1912 and redesigned by Ernst Haiger in 1938 to reflect fascist aesthetics. See Christoph Becker, "The Venice Biennale and Germany's Contributions from 1895 to 1942", in Elke aus dem Moore and Ursula Zeller (eds.), *Germany's Contributions to the Venice Biennale 1895–2007* (Cologne: DuMont, 2009).

58

Bußmann, "Reinhard Mucha", n.p.

59

Hohmeyer, "Unheimlich nach oben drücken", 213.

60

Hans-Joachim Müller, "Das Deutschlandgerät", *Die Zeit*, May 18, 1990, <https://www.zeit.de/1990/21/das-deutschlandgeraet>, last accessed July 2024.

fig. 3

Reinhard Mucha
Das Deutschlandgerät,
Kunstsammlung Nordrhein-Westfalen, K21 Ständehaus, Düsseldorf [2021], [2002], XLIV Biennale di Venezia, Deutscher Pavillon, Venedig 1990 (detail)
The Germany Device,
Kunstsammlung Nordrhein-Westfalen, K21 Ständehaus, Düsseldorf [2021], [2002], XLIV Biennale di Venezia, German Pavilion, Venice 1990
 Multi-part sculptural room installation. Installation view K21, Düsseldorf Kunstsammlung Nordrhein-Westfalen, Düsseldorf
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 Photo Althea Ruoppo
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Das Deutschlandgerät visualises art historian Rosalyn Deutsche's distinction between integrationist and interventionist approaches to site-specific art. In Deutsche's view, the former strategy seeks to closely interact and become unified with the location's pre-existing forms; the latter aims to graft itself onto the setting and purposely exposes its alterity.⁶¹

Mucha made further references to Venice on the West German Pavilion's apse wall. As with the display cases in the inner room, the thirty-eight vitrines outside of it were similarly covered by glass panes with groups of etched vertical lines that are often overlapped by short transverse elements that terminate in an ornamental curved shape [fig. 4]. In a recent conversation, Falk Wolf, curator at the *Kunstsammlung Nordrhein-Westfalen* in Düsseldorf, reminded me that these patterns may indicate the structure of Venice's famous handcrafted gondolas.⁶² Traditionally, the S-curve shape of a gondola's *fero da prora* (iron bow) is symbolic of the twists in the Grand Canal. The *broche* (the six horizontal lines that one finds on the prow-head) are associated with the six *sestieri* (districts) of the city (San Marco, San Polo, Santa Croce, Castello, Dorsoduro, and Cannaregio), and the line opposite with the Giudecca Isle. An untitled drawing by Mucha from 1991, a focused study of a Venetian gondola's prow, demonstrates the artist's attentiveness to its form.⁶³ Meanwhile, on a marble-topped wooden table to the left of the room, Mucha placed a single horizontal vitrine that was physically connected to the outer marble wall

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See Rosalyn Deutsche, *Evictions: Art and Spatial Politics* (Cambridge MA: MIT Press, 1996). Miwon Kwon has examined these existing models of site specificity, as well as her own paradigms of phenomenological, institutional, and discursive site-specificity. See Miwon Kwon, "Sittings of Public Art: Integration versus Intervention", in *One Place After Another: Site Specificity and Locational Identity* (Cambridge MA: MIT Press, 2002), 56–99.

62

The author in conversation with Falk Wolf, Düsseldorf, March 16, 2022. This connection was also made by Jan Verwoert. See Jan Verwoert, "World Speaks Thing", in *Manual No. 5*, n.p.

63

See Mucha, *Mucha: Holiday in Space / Urlaub im All*, Volume 2: 78-79.

of the inner room while inhabiting the outer space of the pavilion [fig. 5]. Writing for the French journal *Cahiers du Musée national d'art moderne* in 2000, Patrick Javault stated that this dark felt-covered display case looked like a kind of stylised gondola.⁶⁴ Thus if the horizontal vitrines found within the installation's inner chamber reference Mucha's attachment to the local, specifically his studio doors and windows, then the vertical ones on the outside walls hint at an international context.

Intriguingly, the transnational qualities of Mucha's installation were discounted by other critics. Writing in *Artforum* in September 1990, Lars Nittve called Mucha an "almost archetypical representative of German contemporaneity".⁶⁵ Some claimed *Das Deutschlandgerät* was too esoteric; even Bußmann called Mucha one of the "most difficult and strange artists".⁶⁶ Others thought the interior chamber projected a "crassly overpowering image" that was too unyielding, strict, and downright cold in character, likening the work to a self-erected mausoleum with standing coffins and a horizontal sarcophagus; a bunker; and even the Reich Chancellery.⁶⁷ In 2009, Helga Meister similarly pointed to the work's imagining of certain national characteristics, including the official flag of the Federal Republic of Germany:

The dark gray of the felt and the deep matte black of the untreated bronze casts, the broken red of the former studio floorboards, the bright yellow of the travertine and the golden cut surfaces and edges on the untreated casting channels of the bronze footstools. Black Red Gold.⁶⁸

Collectively, these interpretations of the project emphasised its visualisation of "Germanness", or the qualities that made it seem fundamentally German in character: its categorical precision, monumentality, rationality, reticence, and symbolic colours.⁶⁹

Mucha has acknowledged that his project was indebted to the Nazi architecture of the West German Pavilion, comparing the 250 x 60 centimeter felt-lined glass-and-aluminum display cases, which were vertically mounted only twenty-five centimeters above the floor on the three walls outside of his inner chamber, to the fascist vestibular pillars of Munich architect Ernst Haiger's remodeled German Pavilion of 1938. Each rectangular vitrine contained a wooden footstool, the legs of which Mucha also compares with the atrium pillars of the Pavilion.⁷⁰ Approximately twelve to fifteen of the forty footstools found in the exterior room vitrines came from a second-hand store, housed in a World War II bunker, that was recommended to the artist by his Frankfurt dealer Bärbel

64

Patrick Javault, "Toutes mémoires confondues: Sur quelques oeuvres de Reinhard Mucha", *Cahiers du Musée national d'art moderne* 71 (Spring 2000): 36.

65

Nittve, "Money Talks", 133. Four years later, Anna Moszynska called Mucha a "quintessentially" Düsseldorf artist. See Moszynska, "Train Spotting with Reinhard Mucha", 9.

66

Peter Dittmar, "Im Gespräch Reinhard Mucha: Einer der Verquersten" (1990), n.p.

67

See Michael Kimmelman, "Review/Art; Venice Biennale Opens with Surprises", *The New York Times*, May 28, 1990, <https://www.nytimes.com/1990/05/28/arts/review-art-venice-biennale-opens-with-surprises.html>, last accessed July 2024; Van Winckel and Kremer, "Reinhard Mucha", 33; Michael Gibson, "From Poetic to the Kitsch at the Biennale", *International Herald Tribune* (June 2–3, 1990).

68

Helga Meister, "Diskussion: Deutschlandgerät", *Kunstforum International* 199 (2009), 411.

69

Significantly, no one perceived a potentially dangerous underlying nationalism in *Das Deutschlandgerät* as they had, for example, in Joseph Beuys' works when they were presented in his retrospective at the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York, a decade earlier. See, for example, Benjamin H. D. Buchloh, Rosalind Krauss, and Annette Michelson, "Joseph Beuys at the Guggenheim", *October* 12 (Spring 1980): 3–21.

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Hohmeyer, "Unheimlich nach oben drücken", 215.

fig. 4

Reinhard Mucha
Das Deutschlandgerät,
Kunstsammlung Nordrhein-Westfalen, K21 Ständehaus, Düsseldorf [2021], [2002], XLIV Biennale di Venezia, Deutscher Pavillon, Venedig 1990 (detail)
The Germany Device,
Kunstsammlung Nordrhein-Westfalen, K21 Ständehaus, Düsseldorf [2021], [2002], XLIV Biennale di Venezia, German Pavilion, Venice 1990
 Multi-part sculptural room installation
 Installation view K21, Düsseldorf
 Kunstsammlung Nordrhein-Westfalen, Düsseldorf
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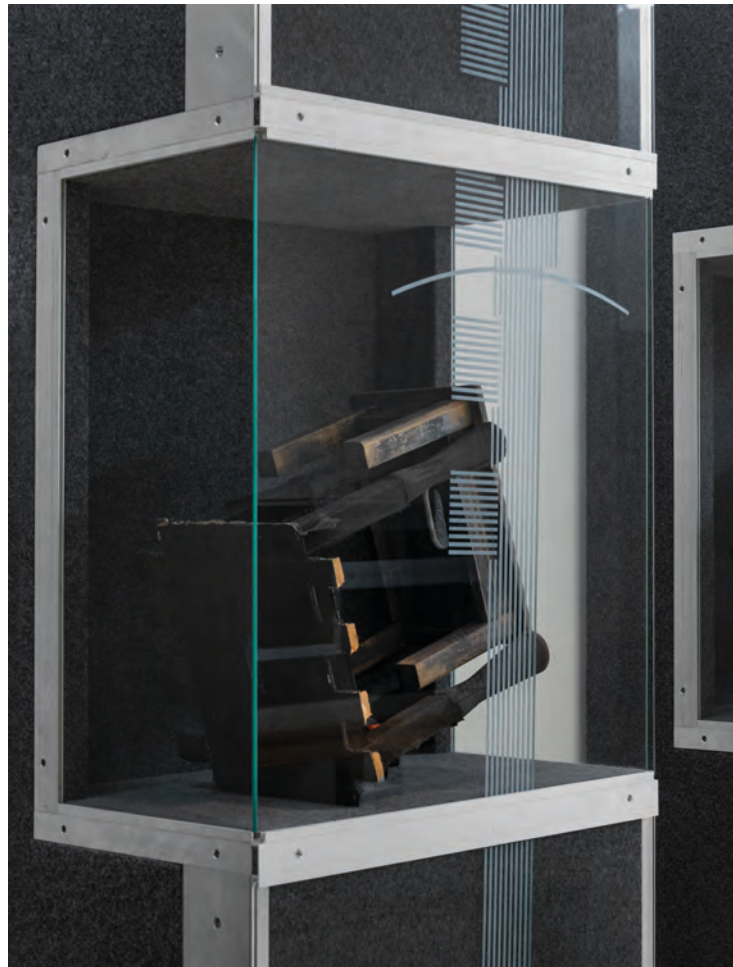


fig. 5

Reinhard Mucha
Das Deutschlandgerät,
Kunstsammlung Nordrhein-Westfalen, K21 Ständehaus, Düsseldorf [2021], [2002], XLIV Biennale di Venezia, Deutscher Pavillon, Venedig 1990 (detail)
The Germany Device,
Kunstsammlung Nordrhein-Westfalen, K21 Ständehaus, Düsseldorf [2021], [2002], XLIV Biennale di Venezia, German Pavilion, Venice 1990
 Multi-part sculptural room installation
 Installation view K21, Düsseldorf
 Kunstsammlung Nordrhein-Westfalen, Düsseldorf
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Grässlin.⁷¹ Mucha's attention to the forms and materials of the German Pavilion and his interest in objects that relate to the country's totalitarian past suggest his contemplation of the historical weight of this building and its connection to the Nazi era. Yet, the artist failed to scrutinise or explicitly critique this space. As Kirsty Bell wrote in 2023,

Mucha's aim is not overthrow. Instead, he represents and repeats given structures, adhering to their parameters in his modes of display, staying in the lines, while performing gestures of disruption or shifts from within. The question of how to respond to authority in a society where authoritarianism was at the root of its historical calamity remains open.⁷²

Mucha's response to the German Pavilion is profoundly different from that of his successors. In 1993, for the next iteration – the first after German reunification, which took place on October 3, 1990 – Hans Haacke destroyed the building's marble floor slabs to symbolise the state of his country, deconstructed the space's associations with Hitler and National Socialism, and contested the pavilion's role in fortifying nationalist ideology.⁷³ At the 59th Venice Biennale in 2022, Maria Eichhorn's installation made historical changes to the German Pavilion's architecture the subject of her work, continuing the theme of subversive projects by German artists who have deliberately undermined the building.⁷⁴ Eichhorn has argued that terms such as nation are becoming obsolete and spoke of the importance of making art that “remains international and cosmopolitan, anarchic, resistant, political and polemical, fragmentary, critical and independent of [nation]”.⁷⁵ Mucha, on the other hand, seemed to retain stale conceptions of the independent nation state, and by keeping this structure intact, he diminished his own work's transnational capacity. Like the late 19th-century's world's fairs, this founding concept formed the guiding framework around the *International Art Exhibition of the City of Venice* – established in 1893 by the mayor of Venice, Riccardo Selvatico (1849–1901) – and its exhibition model of national pavilions, introduced in 1907.

Mucha's act of transposing his Düsseldorf studio to the world stage at the Biennale suggests that the nation state appealed to his sentimental and nostalgic side. This transposition calls to mind the postmodern artist's own deterritorialisation, a topic explored by Miwon Kwon in her groundbreaking book, *One Place After Another: Site Specificity and Locational Identity*. Kwon argues that the nomadic artist's site-oriented practice articulates the local particularities of a place as a reaction to the homogenising force of advanced capitalism which erases cultural differences.⁷⁶ Mucha's installation might be connected then to what Kenneth

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Polly Robinson, letter to Mr. and Mrs. Heinz Ackermans regarding *Reinhard Mucha: Weight on Drivers* (December 10, 1993–January 28, 1994), Anthony d'Offay Gallery, London, December 20, 1993.

72

Kirsty Bell, “Reinhard Mucha's “Der Mucha—An Initial Suspicion”, *e-flux*, February 9, 2023, <https://www.e-flux.com/criticism/518048/reinhard-mucha-s-der-mucha-an-initial-suspicion>, last accessed July 2024.

73

See Hans Haacke, “Gondola! Gondola!”, in Pierre Bourdieu and Hans Haacke (eds.), *Free Exchange*, (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1995); and “Questions to Hans Haacke about his contribution GERMANIA, German Pavilion 1993, 45th International Art Exhibition-La Biennale di Venezia”, in *Maria Eichhorn: Relocating a Structure*, eds. Yilmaz Dziewior and Maria Eichhorn (Cologne: Verlag der Buchhandlung Walther und Franz König, 2022), 126–127.

74

Yilmaz Dziewior and Maria Eichhorn, eds., *Maria Eichhorn: Relocating a Structure* (Cologne: Verlag der Buchhandlung Walther und Franz König, 2022). Eichhorn originally aimed to remove the German Pavilion from its site, transport it to a temporary storage place, and then reconstruct it at its original location after the Biennale concluded.

75

“Biennale-Künstlerin: Begriffe wie Nation lösen sich auf”, *Merur.de*, December 31, 2021, <https://www.merur.de/deutschland/berlin/biennale-kuenstlerin-begriffe-wie-nation-loesen-sich-auf-zr-91206134.html>, last accessed July 2024.

76

Miwon Kwon, “By Way of a Conclusion: One Place after Another”, in *One Place After Another*, 156–167.

Frampton posed as a “critical regionalism” in architecture, a means of countering placelessness by sustaining cultural specificities. Mucha’s relocation of his German studio in Venice might also suggest the artist’s wish for a mobile workspace in an ever-shifting globalising world where one can be at home anywhere. Indeed, in a text from 1980, Mucha wrote about the notion of creating a work “in the local elsewhere” that reflected “the memory of something distant, lost, absent and at the same time as a piece as if from the inner apparatus”.⁷⁷

Other aspects of *Das Deutschlandgerät* appear to uphold the nation state and endorse the Rhineland’s industrial heritage. For example, in each of the thirty-eight outer wall vitrines, Mucha paired his wooden footstools with their respective rough cast-brass copies, propped up on one point by a retractable metal tape measure.⁷⁸ Each mimics the so-called *Deutschlandgerät*, a late 19th-century pneumatic-hydraulic train car device manufactured for the purpose of lifting particularly heavy loads such as bridge constructions or putting derailed locomotives and wagons back on track. This important industrial tool was produced by the former *Maschinenfabrik Deutschland* (Dortmund, 1872-1996), which had become famous during the era of the German Empire for its production of *Deutschlandgeräte* as well as coal feeders for locomotives and loading bridge turntables.⁷⁹ A *Deutschlandgerät* is shown righting a derailed G7 locomotive in Bußmann’s brochure for the West German Pavilion [fig. 6]. Mucha selected the image, and two comprehensive excerpts, from Rolf Ostendorf’s 1979 book *Eisenbahn-Knotenpunkt Ruhrgebiet: Die Entwicklungsgeschichte der Revierbahnen seit 1838* (Railway Junction in the Ruhr Area: The History of the Development of the District Railways since 1838).⁸⁰ The texts aid the reader’s understanding of the term *Deutschlandgerät* and explain that the *Carl Weyer & Co. Waggonfabrik* was largely responsible for the development of the railway system in the North Rhine-Westphalia industrial district and elsewhere in Germany, supplying train cars to the Prussian State Railroad and other German railroads such as the Saxon, the Baden, and the Oldenburg State Railroads. Thus, with *Das Deutschlandgerät*, Mucha honoured the technological ingenuity and achievements of 19th-century Germany.

Despite the work’s attention to the “Germanness” of the German Pavilion’s architecture, commemoration of the Rhineland’s manufacturing activities, and failure to critically engage with a biennale problematically organised along national lines, its industrial transnational elements should not be overlooked. Mucha’s selection of Ostendorf’s excerpts from his book on the development of the Ruhr railways highlighted the fact that the *Düsseldorfer Waggonfabrik*’s financial and technical success was not limited to national railroads at home but to those abroad as well. The company’s products were shown at various expositions in Düsseldorf, Paris, Milan, and Brussels. Many foreign administrations ordered German railroad cars from the factory, including the Anatolian, Middle Eastern, Baghdad, Italian, and Portuguese Railroads. Rolling stock was also exported to the German and Dutch colonies.⁸¹ Given the international history and reach of the *Waggonfabrik Carl Weyer & Cie*, Doris von Drateln argued that “the company itself spreads out a network of destinations, of transport routes”.⁸² The impression of a widespread linkage of places in *Das Deutschlandgerät* was shared by art critics C.H. van Winckel and Mark

77

Mucha, “Letters and Texts 1980–2021”, in *Mucha: Holiday in Space / Urlaub im All*, Volume 2: 332.

78

In his previous 1986 exhibition with the Bechers and Günther Förg at Lühring Augustine & Hodes, New York, Mucha also showed footstools supported by a tape measure that gave the objects a precarious tilt.

79

Bußmann, “Reinhard Mucha”, n.p.

80

Ibid. See also Rolf Ostendorf, *Eisenbahn-Knotenpunkt Ruhrgebiet* (Stuttgart: Motorbuch Verlag, 1979), 259.

81

Bußmann, “Reinhard Mucha”, n.p.

82

Doris von Drateln, “Pavillon BRD: Reinhard Mucha und Bernd und Hilla Becher”, *Kunstforum International*, no. 109 (August–October 1990), 295.

fig. 6

The *Maschinenfabrik*
Deutschland's Germany
Device righting a derailed G7
locomotive, n.d. Bußmann,
Klaus. "Reinhard Mucha: 'Das
Deutschlandgerät' 1990."
In *XLIV Biennale Venedig*
1990: Bernd und Hilla Becher,
Reinhard Mucha: *Deutscher*
Pavillon, 27. Mai bis 30.
September. Milan: n.p., 1990;
Ostendorf, Rolf. *Eisenbahn-
Knotenpunkt Ruhrgebiet*.
Stuttgart: Motorbuch Verlag,
1979.



Kremer. As they noted in the September 1990 edition of the Dutch contemporary art magazine *Metropolis M*, "Waterways, rails, trucks have the strange property of threading places, a property that is strange because the places within this interconnected network become potential targets".⁸³

Mucha's 2018 artist book, *Zossen: Ein Ausflug* (*Zossen: An Excursion*) – named after a train station south of Berlin that opened in 1875 – further underscores the importance of railroads in forging connections.⁸⁴ In multilingual text excerpts in German, French, English, and Italian, Mucha quotes an entry in *Pierer's Universal-Lexikon der Vergangenheit und Gegenwart* (Universal Lexicon of the Present and Past) (1846):

This tremendous means of communication is like an infant Hercules who will one day free people from the suffering of war and famine, who will fertilise their fields, eradicate national hatred and unemployment, and revive the workshops of the people. It has already achieved the most incredible things since its short period of influence and taken up the struggle against the ignorance and brutality to which it is superior. Its technology has brought fortune and grace to the most distant peoples.⁸⁵

Mucha's inclusion of this excerpt is teeming with irony. Train engineers may have aimed to "free people from the suffering of war", "eradicate national hatred", and work "against ignorance and brutality", but by the 1930s their prosperous vision of the railway failed tragically when the *Deutsche Reichsbahn* (German Imperial

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Winckel and Kremer, "Reinhard Mucha", 32.

84

Mucha's recent wall vitrine "*L'Étoile du Nord*" (Star of the North) (2019) is another celebration of the rail network. The artist titled the work after an international express train that connected Paris Nord with Brussels and Amsterdam from 1924–1927. See Reinhard Mucha, *Mucha: Urlaub im All / Holiday in Space* (Cologne: Walther and Franz Koenig Verlag, 2023), Volume 1: 251–254.

85

See Reinhard Mucha, *Zossen: Ein Ausflug* (Düsseldorf: Richter Verlag, Sprüth Magers, Lühring Augustine, Bärbel Grässlin, Lia Rumma, 2018), 140.

Railway) enabled the Nazis to transport their victims to concentration and extermination camps during the Holocaust.⁸⁶

The artist's inconspicuous criticism of Germany's dark industrial history in *Zossen* helps us to understand his use of subtle irony, rather than overt political message, in *Das Deutschlandgerät*.⁸⁷ The metaphor-heavy title of the work can be understood as a witty comment on the symbolic role of the West German Pavilion. Mucha interpreted the building as a "Germany Device" and interrogated its idealised self-image as a stand-in for a potent, stabilised nation at an utterly tumultuous and transformative time in the country's history. Just seven months before the Venice Biennale opening, the Berlin Wall— which served as the physical representation of the Iron Curtain for two generations – fell, posing pressing concerns about the impending national reunification of the two German states, the dissolution of East Germany, and social and economic dislocation across the country.⁸⁸ Yet the German Pavilion in Venice boasts a fixed, unrelenting presence. When asked in a 2009 interview why he called his work *Das Deutschlandgerät*, Mucha admitted that it served as a cipher for the fractured nation state: "In the period of upheaval after 1989 the title was an allusion to the political situation in Germany".⁸⁹

In 1990, the artist explained that the transference and display of his site of production was a kind of fantasy: "If I set up my studio here in a symbolic way, it means, among other things, that I no longer believe in the possibility of breaking down the structures that were created around the Biennale".⁹⁰ But it is unclear if Mucha ever truly thought that he could effectively change the mechanics of institutions and their exhibition operations. In a text from 1983, he explained that artists like himself expand the framework of the exhibition, "not by trying to negate and neutralise it outwardly, but rather by cannibalizing it figuratively and internalizing it as part of itself. Granted, this chunk will never be fully digested". Any "provocative efforts" or "pranks" to co-opt the institution, however, "remain without consequence no matter how brazen they are, because, as "political" artful stunts, they are the first to be swallowed and digested with relish".⁹¹ In 1990, Mucha may have implied, then, that he felt it was not feasible to overcome the longstanding exhibition's 19th-century idea of the autonomous nation. As Hans-Joachim Müller reasoned, "He doesn't want to play the desperado at the Biennale and certainly not in this art-laden building with the monstrous pathos of its architecture".⁹² But did Mucha have faith in the social agency of his practice and its ability to promulgate political change? He seemed to be offering up his "Germany Device" as an apparatus

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Many other contemporary German artists, including Anselm Kiefer, Martin Kippenberger (1953-1997), and Gerhard Richter, have used the trope of the railroad as a means to address the history and legacy of the Third Reich.

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For a discussion of West German artists' use of humour as a critical tactic in the 1970s and 1980s and how modes of reception changed after the dismantling of the Berlin Wall, see Gregory H. Williams, *Permission to Laugh: Humor and Politics in Contemporary German Art* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2012). Within this framework, Mucha seems to operate with wit or subtly subversive forms of humour like Isa Genzken, George Herold, and Rosemarie Trockel. On the occasion of the artist's retrospective, Falk Wolf characterised Mucha's work as an example of "Socratic irony". See Wolf, "Latency, Postminimalism, and Irony", 31. In a 2009 letter to an unknown recipient, Mucha described the artist (perhaps himself) as a "Rabble Rouser—Illuminator—Visionary—Revolutionary—Missionary? As Artist—Jester—Trickster, as a Fool? Disrupter, Destroyer, Eternal Child?" See Reinhard Mucha, "Letters and Texts 1980–2021", in *Mucha: Holiday in Space / Urlaub im All*, Volume 2: 341.

88

Just three days after the close of the 44th Venice Biennale, Germany was whole again, and eventually all the former communist regimes of Eastern Europe would collapse.

89

Meister, "Diskussion: Deutschlandgerät".

90

Müller, "Das Deutschlandgerät", 61.

91

Mucha, "Recursive Model—Context and Cannibalism", in *Mucha: Holiday in Space / Urlaub im All*, Volume 2: 335.

92

Müller, "Das Deutschlandgerät", 61.

that then-Chancellor of Germany Helmut Kohl and East German Prime Minister Lothar de Maiziere could use to realign the symbolic West German-East German train. Reviewing the 2022 Mucha survey exhibition at the *Kunstsammlung Nordrhein-Westfalen*, Ralf Stiftel considered the artist's footstools and their bronze casts object representatives of the FRG and GDR: "Perhaps the hugging pieces of furniture also symbolise the parts of Germany that are finding each other again".⁹³

Rather than performing a blatant critique, Mucha tapped into the German Pavilion's history, formal language, and purpose, suggesting that he was passively contemplating issues of nationalism during a period of national soul-searching.⁹⁴ He highlighted the traditional nation-state framework invoked by the pavilion but fell short of truly deconstructing the site or exposing the inherent ideologies and power structures that underly its display of German art. This important detail makes his comparatively conservative project distinct from the confrontational tactics of institutional critique during the 1970s.

Das Deutschlandgerät exceeded local and national events in 1989 and 1990 through its presentation abroad. By placing items from his studio in conversation with building materials from northern Italy's Veneto region (marble) and incorporating elements of the surrounding site of the Biennale (gondolas), Mucha collapsed spatial boundaries. In some ways, this undertaking references post-Wall Germany's radical change in international relations.⁹⁵ The artist understood the pavilion not just as an isolated German territory on Italian soil, but as an organic part of Venice engaged in interplay with an event of international renown.

***Das Deutschlandgerät* in Düsseldorf, 2002/2021**

Immediately following the Venice Biennale, collectors Heinz and Simone Ackermans acquired *Das Deutschlandgerät* but were not able to show it for lack of a suitable space. In 2002, they lent the work and others in their collection to the *Kunstsammlung Nordrhein-Westfalen*. Since *Das Deutschlandgerät* had been dismantled after the Biennale, Mucha needed to reassemble the work from the ground up for its permanent display on the second floor of the *Kunstsammlung's* new location for art after 1980, K21.⁹⁶ The artist painstakingly amended this project for over a year so that it would correspond to the spatial conditions of the local situation, calling the work "*quasi a posteriori autochthonous*" (native to the place, so to speak).⁹⁷ *Das Deutschlandgerät* was installed in German architect Julius Carl

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Ralf Stiftel, "Die Kunstsammlung NRW zeigt das Werk von Reinhard Mucha", *Wa*, September 27, 2022, <https://www.wa.de/kultur/die-kunstsammlung-nrw-zeigt-das-werk-von-reinhard-mucha-91815002.html>, last accessed July 2024.

94

In 2021, German writer Ingo Schulze appropriated *Das Deutschlandgerät* to support his commentary on nationalist discourse in the novel *Tasso im Irrenhaus: Erzählungen*. Schulze's fictional narrator uses the derailment inherent in Mucha's work as a metaphor for his own experience as an East German dissident writer who is forced to leave the GDR for West Germany and feels unsettled in this new political and social environment. See Ingo Schulze, *Tasso im Irrenhaus: Erzählungen* (Munich: dtv Verlagsgesellschaft, 2021), 7-49.

95

West Germany had signed the Schengen Agreement in 1985, along with France, Belgium, Luxembourg, and the Netherlands, signaling the gradual abolition of national borders.

96

In 2009, *Das Deutschlandgerät* was slated for temporary removal for five years by former Kunstsammlung Nordrhein-Westfalen director Marion Ackermann so that the museum could exhibit modern and contemporary works from the permanent collection. Mucha and several artists and museum professionals protested the decision, and the work was subsequently never dismantled. See Ulrich Deuter and Helga Meister, "Das sind meine eigenen Ansätze", *kultur.west*, October 1, 2009, <https://www.kulturwest.de/inhalt/das-sind-meine-eigenen-ansaeetze/>, last accessed July 2024; and Christiane Hoffmans, "Aus der Hüfte geschossen", *Welt*, September 13, 2009, https://www.welt.de/welt_print/vermishtes/article4522876/Aus-der-Huefte-geschossen.html, last accessed July 2024.

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Georg Imdahl, "Kunstsammlung. Streit um das 'Deutschlandgerät'", *Kölner Stadt-Anzeiger*, September 7, 2009. *Das Deutschlandgerät* formally entered the collection in 2004, when the Ackermans donated 142 works to the Kunstsammlung Nordrhein-Westfalen, many by artists with great international renown who have attended the Düsseldorf Art Academy, lived in the city, or had their first successes there: Katharina Fritsch, Martin Honert, Reinhard Mucha, Thomas Ruff, Thomas Schütte, and Pia Stadtbäumer.

Raschdorff's grand neo-Renaissance building of 1880 – the *Ständehaus* (Estates House) – which had served NRW's changing state parliaments until 1988 and was renovated by Munich firm Kiessler & Partner from 1996 to 2002. In accordance with Mucha's practice of repurposing and recontextualising his works in relation to the place in which they are exhibited, the artist made use of the 9 (h) x 17,5 (l) 17 (w) meter deep gallery space of the old plenary hall in which his installation would be housed, placing his central chamber—now titled *Gallery 2.1* and slightly larger than in Venice at 5 (h) x 6,4 (l) 9,2 (w) meter—in the large space behind the room's eight faux-marble black and white columns. Just as in Venice, the inner chamber matched the dimensions of Mucha's Düsseldorf workspace, showcased its worn floorboards, and included his desk. For a second time, the artist had transported elements of his studio across national borders, suggesting an image of uninhibited movement from Germany to Italy and back home again.

Mucha supplemented the original work with an oblique reference to a place not far from his studio. The source of a loud, continuously whirring noise in K21's gallery is unrecognisable, but it has been identified as vehicles crossing the expansion joint of southern Düsseldorf's *Fleher Brücke* (Flehe Bridge) over the Rhine River, a major waterway that was central to the formation of German national consciousness and identity from the early 19th century to the mid-20th century.⁹⁸ If the reverberating traffic sounds along this internationally-important commercial transport route suggest the “relentlessness of the post-industrial everyday”, then the addition of fifteen televisions, fifteen DVD players, three CD players, and nine loudspeakers might have implied the global reach of the media, pointing to the notion that the boundaries defining national identity had become even more nebulous in the early 21st century.⁹⁹

Mucha also added, in front of the architectural columns, an imposing glass and felt-covered wood sculpture called *Zollverein I/II* (2002), which serves as a barrier to entry into the installation and as a wall that shields the doorway into a neighboring gallery on the north side of the building. The work's title refers to Essen's monumental Zollverein Coal Mine and Zollverein Coking Plant which opened in 1847; shuttered in 1986 and 1993, respectively; and were jointly designated a United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) World Heritage Site in 2001.¹⁰⁰ Mucha's recreation of this towering structure in sculptural form reaffirms *Das Deutschlandgerät*'s Rhine-Ruhr roots and serves as a steadfast reminder of the artist's immense pride in his region's manufacturing past. At the same time, connecting *Das Deutschlandgerät* with what the World Heritage Committee defines as a cultural or natural site that has “outstanding universal value”, or global significance that transcends national boundaries, endorses the work's capacity for industrial transnationalism.¹⁰¹

Despite *Das Deutschlandgerät*'s return to Düsseldorf, certain features of the installation referred to its original Venetian site, securing the memory of its first presentation. For example, with the aid of stone experts, Mucha searched again in Italy for the quarry that produced the *Chiampo mandorlato giallognolo* marble that made up the Nazi era floor in the German Pavilion.¹⁰² He also expanded the work

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See Ulrich Loock, “Can a contemporary art museum support the anachronism of a work which fundamentally challenges the museum's historic mission?”, *Cura Magazine* no. 3 (January-February 2010), 58–62.

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Bell, “Reinhard Mucha's “Der Mucha—An Initial Suspicion”.

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For more information, see “Zollverein Coal Mine Industrial Complex in Essen”, <https://whc.unesco.org/en/list/975/>, last accessed July 2024.

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UNESCO World Heritage Convention, “Recommendation concerning the Protection, at National Level, of the Cultural and Natural Heritage”, November 16, 1972, <https://www.unesco.org/en/legal-affairs/recommendation-concerning-protection-national-level-cultural-and-natural-heritage>, last accessed July 2024.

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Meister, “Diskussion: Deutschlandgerät”, 410.

by adding CRT monitors which displayed looping, split-screen video animations that juxtaposed and wove together images of the studio building in Düsseldorf; the dismantling and removal of his workspace's wooden floor; mining tunnels, hydraulic lifting devices, and bridge structures; the architecture of the German Pavilion in Venice and Mucha's and the Bechers's presentations there; and studies of the footstools and their casts. As Sebastian Egenhofer has pointed out, Mucha even installed a U-shape row of double fluorescent tubes above the thirty-eight exterior vitrines in a way that mimics the permanently installed lighting and their metal fixtures in the German Pavilion.¹⁰³ Through these thoughtful modifications, Mucha effectively brought Germany and Italy into dialogue for a second time.

In the winter of 2021, in anticipation of his upcoming retrospective at K20 and K21, Mucha again made technical and content adaptations to *Das Deutschlandgerät*, turning the existing CRT monitors on their sides by ninety degrees and using them as supports for fifteen flat video monitors [fig. 7]. He also carved a small square insert into the inner chamber, revealing the solid brick structure that lay underneath the gray felt wall. In it the artist placed his work, *Menzione d'Onore* (Mention of Honour, 2021), a red case containing the Golden Lion honourable mention plaque that he received in 1990, on top of a tan and black upholstered foot stool. These most recent additions to the installation reveal the ongoing importance of the Venice Biennale in Mucha's work.

fig. 7

Reinhard Mucha
Das Deutschlandgerät,
Kunstsammlung Nordrhein-Westfalen, K21 Ständehaus, Düsseldorf [2021], [2002], XLIV Biennale di Venezia, Deutscher Pavillon, Venedig 1990 (detail)
The Germany Device,
Kunstsammlung Nordrhein-Westfalen, K21 Ständehaus, Düsseldorf [2021], [2002], XLIV Biennale di Venezia, German Pavilion, Venice 1990
Multi-part sculptural room installation
Installation view K21, Düsseldorf
Kunstsammlung Nordrhein-Westfalen, Düsseldorf
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Photo Althea Ruoppo
Courtesy the Artist and Sprüth Magers
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Egenhofer, "Spatialized Memory", 173.

In a conversation with art critic Helga Meister in 1989, Mucha stated that careful consideration of his sculptures' individual elements was essential to comprehending their subtexts: "Seen in isolation and at first glance, many things do not look like art from the outset, like an artistic whole. Only those who see, recognise and name all the components of a work can understand the meaning of my pictures".¹⁰⁴ For Mucha, a sculpture is like a documentary photograph: an image that attempts to objectively record the world. His instructions for interpretation place a heavy burden of responsibility on the curator, the critic, and the art historian, who run the risk of boring the visitor or reader with descriptive detail. One may grasp that *Das Deutschlandgerät*'s various materials are connected to the artist's private studio in Düsseldorf, Germany's national railway, and the country's impending reunification: contextual ties that aid in its classification as another example of an artwork that belongs to a national category. Indeed, Mucha's return of the work to its German origins with its reconstruction at the *Kunstsammlung Nordrhein-Westfalen* in his native Düsseldorf complicates the notion of the industrial transnational. In the artist's 2022 exhibition catalogue, *Gallery 2.1* is labeled as a "non-demountable exhibition space" in the media description of *Das Deutschlandgerät*. This characterisation seems to suggest that a "Germany Device" is meant exclusively for display in a German space.¹⁰⁵ Yet by following Mucha's advice and reevaluating the work's components, as has been done in this essay, one might arrive at the conclusion that the artist rendered, in 1990 and again in 2002 and 2021, the industrial transnational through his appropriation of various forms and materials from, and references to, the local Venetian context. *Das Deutschlandgerät* illuminates his efforts toward cultural sensitivity to the shared manufacturing heritage of familiar and foreign places alike. It creates a complex network of associations, simultaneously moving within and far beyond its local German sources.¹⁰⁶ With this work, the artist memorialised, more generally, what he calls our "collective biography", or the common experiences that shape us. Indeed, for Mucha, the railways serve as a "model for explaining the world".¹⁰⁷

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Meister, "Diskussion: Deutschlandgerät", 411.

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See "List of Works", in *Der Mucha: Ein Anfangsverdacht*, 297.

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Here again, Miwon Kwon's study of site-specificity is a helpful model in understanding a relational sensibility that holds places in a state of dialectical tension. Such site-oriented practices address "the uneven conditions of adjacencies and distances *between* [...] one place [...] *next* to another, rather than invoking equivalences via one thing *after* another". See Miwon Kwon, "By Way of a Conclusion", 166.

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Alexander Pühringer, "Reinhard Mucha - Eine Annäherung", *Noema* (July/August 1990): 46. Mucha is quoted as using the German word *Welterklärungsmodell*.

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	Rather Transitional than Transnational: The “meta-pavilions” of Germany and Russia at the 1993 Venice Biennale Matteo Bertelé Abstract The 45th International Art Exhibition held in 1993 represents a watershed in the history of the Venice Biennale. This was due to the transitional historical moment from the end of the Cold War to the onset of globalization, but also to the contribution of appointed curator Achille Bonito Oliva. The article investigates from a comparative approach two much-debated national pavilions presented on that occasion: those of the reunified Germany and the temporary Commonwealth of Independent States, which respectively presented <i>Germania</i> by Hans Haacke, and the <i>Red Pavilion</i> by Ilya Kabakov. Among all national participations, the two pavilions earned an unrivalled exposure and favourable reviews in both general and professional press. Both artists created large-scale site-specific installations which, by intervening on the existing architecture, challenged their status as a showcase of the “national character”. Within an Exhibition dictated by buzzwords such as “cultural nomadism”, “coexistence” and “transnationality”, the two pieces eventually restated the relevance of the national pavilions, showing their potential as artistic and curatorial tools. Keywords 1993; Venice Biennale; Achille Bonito Oliva; Ilya Kabakov; Hans Haacke; Pavilion; Germany; Russia; Soviet Union		
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Rather Transitional than Transnational: The “meta-pavilions” of Germany and Russia at the 1993 Venice Biennale

Matteo Bertelé

Introduction

In highlighting key-moments and debates that contributed to redefine national pavilions “from obsolete to contemporary” artistic and curatorial tools, Clarissa Ricci outlined the relevance of the 1993 Venice Biennale.¹ Dictated by key words such as cultural nomadism and coexistence, this exhibition finally opened up new possibilities for one of the eldest elements of the Venice Biennale, the national participations, reasserting their relevance and potential. The present article focuses on two much-debated national participations: those of the reunified Germany and the dismantled Soviet Union. By investigating common issues and essential divergences, the inquiry moves from a dual comparative approach which, as art historians Beat Wyss and Jörg Scheller have proved and practiced, lends itself as a relevant method for new scholarship in the studies of the Venice Biennale and an adaptable “principle” for further surveys in comparative art history. In 1993, a transitional period from Cold-war divisions to the onset of globalisation, the two pavilions experimented a practice of “constructing, inventing and representing concepts of (inter-, trans-) national or (inter-, trans-) cultural identities via inclusion or exclusion, rapprochement or distancing”.²

1

Clarissa Ricci, “From Obsolete to Contemporary: National Pavilions and the Venice Biennale”, *Journal of Curatorial Studies* 9, no. 1 (2020): 8-39, https://doi.org/10.1386/jcs_00009_1; on the 1993 Exhibition, from the same author see: “Towards a Contemporary Venice Biennale: Reassessing the Impact of the 1993 Exhibition”, *OBOE Journal*, no. 1 (2020): 78-98, <https://doi.org/10.25432/2724-086X/1.1.0007>; “Hi Tech Gondola. The Venice Biennale in an Advertisement”, *Predella*, no. 48 (2020): 133-151, <https://predella.it/clarissa-ricci/>, accessed November 2024; “La Coesistenza dell'Arte (1993), ovvero il transnazionalismo alla prova della caduta del muro di Berlino”, *Novecento Transnazionale. Letterature, Arti e Culture* 6, (2022): 74-88, <https://doi.org/10.13133/2532-1994/17916>; “Passage to the Orient (1993). Re-assessing the Role of the 'Orient' as 'Avant-garde' during the Rise of Globalisation”, *World Art* 13, no. 1 (2023): 101-124, <https://doi.org/10.1080/21500894.2022.2150888>

2

Beat Wyss, Jörg Scheller, “Comparative Art History: The Biennale Principle”, in Clarissa Ricci (ed.), *Starting from Venice* (Milan: et. al., 2010), 50-61. Annika Hossain, Kinga Bódi, Daria Ghiu, “Layers of Exhibition. The Venice Biennale and Comparative Art Historical Writing”, *Kunsttexte.de*, no. 2 (2011): 1-6, <https://doi.org/10.48633/ksttx.2011.2.88032>

1. Cardinal Points of Art: Charting New Geographies

The 1993 art Biennale was the first Exhibition organised in an odd year since 1909, as the one scheduled for 1992 was postponed by one year to allow for the organisation, in 1995, of the so-called “Centenary Biennale”. In this way, the 1993 Exhibition is considered from its outset a transitional event from the 1990 iteration – the last to be held in Cold-war times – to the historic, self-celebratory 1995 art show. The 1990 Biennale was profoundly affected by the echoes of recent geo-political divisions: even though the Berlin Wall had already fallen, the German Democratic Republic was still presenting its national pavilion, hosted for the occasion in the vacant Venice pavilion, while the exhibition of the Federal Republic was displayed as per tradition in the German pavilion. At its last appearance in Venice, the Soviet Union presented a group show of young artists supported by the *Pervaya Galereia*, the first private gallery to open in Moscow in early 1989. Upon personal invitation of the artists, Robert Rauschenberg joined the exhibition with a monumental painting which occupied the central position of the group show, accordingly titled *Rauschenberg to Us, We to Rauschenberg*³. For the first (and last) time in the Biennale history, the Soviet pavilion was awarded an official prize: an honourable mention awarded by the international jury for the “obvious desire for rejuvenation of its artists”.⁴

The accommodating rhetoric of the 1990 Biennale was supplanted three years later by the ambitious programme set out by its newly appointed Director of the Department of Visual arts, hence curator of the 45th Exhibition, Achille Bonito Oliva. Biennale’s President Gian Luigi Rondi assigned him a two-year term, with the option of a second biennial renewal. Bonito Oliva was aware that with the 1993 exhibition not only would his international reputation be at stake, but also the opportunity to curate the Centenary Biennale.

Under the title *Cardinal Points of Art*, Bonito Oliva intended to map a new art geography in light of the recent geopolitical upheavals. He envisioned to show the plurality and diversity of worldwide artistic languages in the process of hybridisation and transmigration among the four cardinal points. In proclaiming this, he intended to subvert the generally accepted transnational trajectories: not only from the West to the East, but also from the East to the West, as well from the South to the North. In the name of ‘transnationality’ – defined in the curatorial statement as “an intertwining of nations capable of producing cultural eclecticism and necessary interracial unity”⁵ – participating countries were asked to break with the Biennale *raison d’être* of national (self)-representation by inviting artists of other nationalities. In two preliminary meetings held in Venice in July and November 1992 with national commissioners, traditionally held to establish dialogue and share views, Bonito Oliva had prompted them to invite artists from countries that had no pavilions yet.⁶

Besides the historical locations of Giardini and Arsenale, the 1993 Exhibition included fifteen venues scattered throughout the city following a mosaic structure, which laid the foundations for the present-day expanded Biennale

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Sandra Frimmel, “1990”, in Nikolay Molok (ed.), *Russian Artists at the Venice Biennale (1895-2013)* (Moscow: Stella Art Foundation, 2013), 500-515.

4

“Rauschenberg to Us, We to Rauschenberg, 1990”, in Kate Fowle, Ruth Addison (eds.), *Exhibit Russia. The New International Decade: 1986-1996* (Moscow: Garage Museum of Contemporary Art, 2015), 132-139.

5

Achille Bonito Oliva, “Cardinal Points of Art”, in 45. *International Art Exhibition. Cardinal Points of Art. Theoretical Essays* (Venice-Naples: Marsilio-Ulisse, Calipso edizioni mediterranee, 1993), 9-27, here 10.

6

Minutes of the Commissioners meeting, July 3-4, 1992, La Biennale di Venezia, Archivio Storico delle Arti Contemporanee (hereinafter ASAC), collection Fondo Storico (hereinafter FS), series Arti Visive (hereinafter AV), box (hereinafter b.) 518, Verbale della riunione. Minutes of the Second Commissioners meeting, November 13-14, 1992, ASAC, FS, AV, b. 520, fasc. 7.

format.⁷ Another implementation concerned the duration of the vernissage, now extended to several days of press and professional previews. Since the first day of the opening, the pavilions of Germany and Russia earned the attention of international critics and art professionals, obtaining an incomparable exposure thanks to positive reviews in both the general and professional press.⁸

2. *Germania aka Bodenlos*: The Outrageous Nationhood

Germany's appointed commissioner Klaus Bussmann invited two artists partially related to Germany: Hans Haacke, originally from Cologne, but a big-time New Yorker, and Nam June Paik, a native Korean based in the United States, but mostly active since the Sixties in West-Germany. These two nominees were intended to dispel concerns in Europe about a comeback – in the arts field also – of a *Großdeutschland* after its reunification. Bussmann considered the two artists evidence of the “extreme cultural willingness and open-mindedness” presented as the “best qualities of post-war Germany”, implying with that the Federal Republic alone.⁹

Haacke titled his piece *Germania* (Italian for Germany), a nomination rendered both on the façade and in the interior back wall of the building: the former as an architectural component of the pavilion, the latter as an element of his intervention. Associations were also made with *Welthauptstadt Germania* (World Capital Germania), the name that Hitler had preliminary assigned to Berlin as the centre of the new world in the event of its final victory in World War II.¹⁰ In his catalogue contribution, art critic Walter Grasskamp asserted that Haacke's installation was articulated along the two main coordinates shaping his overall work: timing and location.¹¹ The comeback of Germany as the new central European power dictated the historical timing, while its historical pavilion at Giardini provided the location. Originally erected in 1909 to host Bavarian art, the pavilion was acquired three years later by the German Empire; from 1920 to 1932 it hosted the art of the Weimar Republic. In 1938 it underwent renovation plans by architect Ernst Haiger in a neoclassical monumental style, intended to embody the imperial aspirations of the Third Reich. After World War II, Nazi heraldry was removed from the façade of the construction, which in 1950 was definitively seized by the Bonn Republic. In 1964 functional changes to both interior and exterior were

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New exhibition venues included external national pavilions, retrospective and group shows hosted in municipal museums and disused palaces, as well as open-air and site-specific installations. For an exhaustive overview, see Clarissa Ricci, “Towards a Contemporary Venice Biennale”: 88-90.

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See, among others, Grace Glueck, “The Spotty, Irresistible 45th Venice Biennale Unfolds”, *The New York Observer*, June 30, 1993. Reviews and photo reportages published in the following weeks also foregrounded the German and the Russian pavilions as the most topical national participations (Peter J. Schneemann, “Die Biennale von Venedig: nationale Präsentation und internationaler Anspruch”, *Zeitschrift für schweizerische Archäologie und Kunstgeschichte* 4, no. 53 (1996): 313-322. “Biennale Venedig '93. Ein Foto-Rundgang von Wolfgang Träger”, *Kunstforum International*, no. 124 (November-December 1993): 242-331, Germany: 242-255; Russia: 256-259.

9

Klaus Bussmann, “Repubblica Federale di Germania”, in 45. *Esposizione Internazionale d'Arte. Punti Cardinali dell'Arte* (Venice, La Biennale di Venezia, June 14-October 10, 1993), exh. cat. (Venezia: Marsilio, 1993), vol. 1, 172. All translations in the text from German, Italian and Russian are by the Author.

10

See Anja Osswald, Katia Reich, “Art after Postmodernism. The German Contributions from 1993 to 2007”, in Elke aus dem Moore, Ursula Zeller (eds.), *Germany's Contributions to the Venice Biennale 1895-2007* (Cologne: DuMont, 2009), 147-163, here 147.

11

Walter Grasskamp, “No-Man's Land” in Klaus Bussmann, Florian Matzner (eds.), *Hans Haacke. Bodenlos*, (German Pavilion, La Biennale di Venezia, June 14-October 10, 1993), exh. cat. (Ostfildern: Hatje Cantz, 1993), 51-64, here 57.

made, yet without questioning its national socialist legacy.¹² As a result, its overall structure had remained almost unaltered ever since. As Bussmann recalled in the first commissioners meeting held in Venice, after the reunification heated debates had emerged in Germany about the appropriateness of such a legacy, including the possibility – if not to tear down the pavilion – at least to confer upon it “a somehow less fascist appearance”.¹³ Due to lack of time and funding, it was not possible to restyle the pavilion before the opening of the 45th Exhibition. Hence, the decision to invite Haacke, the “Politikünstler” *par-excellence*, was intended to meet the needs to challenge the historical implications associated with the national pavilion of Germany.¹⁴

Indeed, Haacke questioned the pavilion’s troublesome legacy, perceived as an eloquent incarnation of repressed national taboos. After the Nuremberg Trials, the partition of Germany and the following policy of coexistence (and connivance) had deferred any shared in-depth debate on recent German history. Now, in the premises of the reunified pavilion, it was time to come to terms with the past. Haacke intervened in the very structure of the building, deconstructing its national socialist foundations and gutting the interior flooring. The planned itinerary started at the main entrance of the pavilion, dominated by a plastic, oversized replica of a 1 *Deutschmark* coin from 1990, the year of the monetary union, mounted where the swastika-emblazoned imperial eagle was once placed. Visitors were then forced to walk by a photograph of Hitler during his visit to the 1934 Exhibition, and thus be confronted face to face with the history of the nation here represented. The catalogue of the German pavilion was titled *Bodenlos*, a term with multiple relevant semantic associations, meaning both “groundless” and “outrageous”.

Through his pervasive interventions, Haacke addressed not only the architectural stratifications of the German pavilion, but also the shifting political agendas of its host institution, the Venice Biennale. In his thoroughly documented contribution for the catalogue titled “Gondola! Gondola!”, the artist outlined the Biennale’s transformation from a propaganda stage for Fascist Italy into a showcase for globalised art commodities, dictated by private stakeholders and lobbies, implanted in a city downgraded into a global hub for mass tourism.¹⁵

The multimedia installation by Paik, entitled *Electronic Super Highway: Bill Clinton stole my idea!* acted as a counterbalance to Haacke’s piece and as a connection between the inside and the outside of the pavilion.¹⁶ It comprised indoor video installations on monitors and projections, and outdoor anthropomorphic video sculptures of historical figures such as Catherine the Great, combining, in her case, celebratory equestrian statuary with the “network

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Annette Lagler, “The German Pavilion”, in Elke aus dem Moore, Ursula Zeller (eds.), *Germany’s Contributions to the Venice Biennale 1895-2007*, 51-61. On the exhibitions held in the German pavilion during the Cold War see Annette Lagler, “Biennale Venedig. Der deutsche Pavillon 1948-1988”, *Jahresring* 36 (1989): 78-133, and the dedicated contributions in Jan May, Sabine Meine (eds.), *Der deutsche Pavillon. Ein Jahrhundert nationaler Repräsentation auf der Internationalen Kunstausstellung “La Biennale di Venezia” 1912-2012* (Regensburg: Schnell & Steiner, 2015).

13

Klaus Bussmann, Minutes of the Commissioners meeting, July 3-4, 1992, ASAC, FS, AV, b. 518, Verbale della riunione, 48.

14

Twenty years before, Gerhard Richter faced the problematic architecture of the pavilion with his painting series *48 Portraits*, created *ad hoc* for the ambience. On the analogies between the two installations see Cristina Baldacci, “Memoria sovvertita. Hans Haacke e Gerhard Richter nel padiglione tedesco”, in Francesca Castellani, Eleonora Charans (eds.), *Crocevia Biennale* (Milano: Scalpendi, 2017), 247-256.

15

Hans Haacke, “Gondola! Gondola!”, in Klaus Bussmann, Florian Matzner (eds.), *Hans Haacke: Bodenlos*, 27-35.

16

Commissioner Bussmann informed Bonito Oliva about Paik’s intention to use the four side halls of the pavilion as well as the outdoor area around the building since “it is in close interconnection to the pavilion itself”. Klaus Bussmann to Achille Bonito Oliva, Münster, October 1992, ASAC, FS, AV, b. 528, fasc. 2, Germania.

revolution”.¹⁷ The installation epitomised a further “cardinal point” of the present Exhibition, the new media as the *lingua franca* of the emerging Global village, dictated, in Bonito Oliva’s words, by a “technological polycentrism”.¹⁸

As archival findings and printed sources demonstrate, an overall preference for the German pavilion emerged from the very early stages of the exhibition. Prior personal connections between Bonito Oliva and the two artists (especially Paik), based on mutual friendship and esteem, inevitably influenced his positive predisposition towards the German project.¹⁹ Once disclosed at the commissioners meeting, the project met with the unconditional approval and support of Bonito Oliva, who regarded it not just as a “fortunate cultural coincidence”, but as proof that the “key word of the cardinal points of art” was being comprehensively treated as an urgent issue. By relying on national stereotypes, he confessed to value “German efficiency” for “giving an answer even before the question was asked”.²⁰ It follows that in his opening essay for the general catalogue, Bonito Oliva overtly called “Germany’s trans-national pavilion” an example of best practice.²¹ A few pages later, Bussmann expressed his gratitude to the Biennale’s artistic director for his enduring enthusiasm towards the German contribution, which he felt entitled to define “the leitmotiv of the entire Exhibition” for pushing forward “all global relations and interests”, which were nothing less than the “ultimate goals of the current Biennale”.²² Finally, Dieter Honisch, the director of the Neue Nationalgalerie in Berlin and appointed member of the Biennale Advisory Committee, praised, in a letter to Bonito Oliva, the programme of the German pavilion as a “marvellous example” of intercultural dialogue between Europe, America and Asia.²³ The horizon of expectations towards the German contribution was extremely high and, at this point, its national pavilion seemed unlikely to disappoint.

3. The Red Pavilion: A Private Matter?

Where the German pavilion was thoroughly planned as relevant to the concept of the 1993 Exhibition, the genesis of the former Soviet pavilion was byzantine and accidental. In the first instance, the Biennale administration had to review its protocols in compliance with an official notice received from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in Rome about the fifteen former Soviet republics currently recognised by the Italian Government as sovereign States.²⁴ Within the Biennale’s procedure, it meant that each of these countries had acquired the status of a “national participation”, hence the right to present its own pavilion, even though none of them had a dedicated venue yet. Finally, a collective participation under the common flag of the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) was opted for, as had been the case in 1992 with the national team at the Summer Olympic Games in Barcelona. The

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Patricia Mellencamp, “The Old and the New: Nam June Paik”, *Art Journal* 54, no. 4 (Winter 1995): 41-47. In light of past collaborations and Paik’s status as the “most important video artist present at the 1993 Biennale”, Bonito Oliva commissioned from Paik a series of short videos titled *Hi Tech Gondola*, intended to brand a new image of the Biennale (see Clarissa Ricci, “*Hi Tech Gondola*”).

18

Achille Bonito Oliva, “Cardinal Points of Art”, 13.

19

See footnote 17 and Clarissa Ricci, “*Hi Tech Gondola*”: 134.

20

Achille Bonito Oliva, Minutes of the Commissioners meeting, July 3-4, 1992, ASAC, FS, AV, b. 518, Verbale della riunione, 49.

21

Achille Bonito Oliva, “Cardinal Points of Art”, 17.

22

Klaus Bussmann, “Repubblica Federale di Germania”, 172.

23

Dieter Honisch to Achille Bonito Oliva, Berlin, July 28, 1992, ASAC, FS, AV, b. 521, Corrispondenza con Dieter Honisch.

24

Ministry of Foreign Affairs to the Venice Biennale, Rome, July 3, 1992, ASAC, FS, AV, b. 529, Russia.

Biennale administration was later informed that the management of the national participation rested with the Ministry of Culture of the Russian Federation, as “the legitimate heir of the property and the expenses of the Ministry of Culture of the USSR”.²⁵ This circumstance explains why the CIS pavilion was informally called the Russian pavilion, in line with a tradition of interchangeably using “Soviet” and “Russian” as synonyms. This simplification was formally correct within the toponymy of the Venice Biennale when referring to the building itself, which had been commissioned, constructed and inaugurated in 1914 in Imperial Russia, under the aegis of the Tsar’s family.²⁶

Continuity with the recent past was interrupted by Vladimir Goriainov, the Soviet commissioner since 1964, who decided to give up the organisation of the pavilion. This was due to his worsening health condition but also to the new circumstances, with the Ministry of Culture being unable to provide any substantial support, hence relegating the role of commissioner to project manager.²⁷ Goriainov acknowledged that the time had come to make finally room for new names. While officially retaining his post, he backed the *de facto* commissioner, art critic Leonid Bazhanov, who had recently been appointed director of the Department of Visual Arts at the Ministry of Culture.²⁸ From Moscow Bazhanov obtained an overall budget of ten thousand roubles, an amount mostly sufficient to purchase – in his own words – a one-way ticket to Venice.²⁹

From the very first steps it was clear that the managing of the national pavilion was not a priority for the Russian Government, back then afflicted by financial issues such as rapid inflation and the liquidation of State properties. Bazhanov therefore had to find support abroad from private parties and, without any further consultation, he invited Ilya Kabakov to exhibit, the best internationally known Russian artist, and hence the most likely to attract foreign sponsors.³⁰ One was soon found in Austrian art dealer Peter Pakesch, who assumed all costs associated with the production of Kabakov’s project.³¹ The rapid transition in post-socialist Russia from a collectivist, State-planned society to a private, free-market system was sanctioned by the entity of the pavilion itself, which no longer hosted overcrowded group shows intended to represent Soviet cultural riches, but one single artist, residing, furthermore, in the United States. In light of Kabakov’s worldwide recognition, Bonito Oliva’s call for transnationality was primarily embraced for pragmatic reasons. The emigration of Russian artists – a circumstance repeatedly mentioned by Bazhanov as the main problem affecting contemporary Russian art – eventually turned out to be an asset.³² At the same time, the invitation to an émigré artist such as Kabakov could be presented as a response to the nomadic and transnational condition evoked by Bonito Oliva.

25

Alexander Shkurko, Deputy Minister of Culture of the Russian Federation, to the Venice Biennale, Moscow, June 15a, 1992, ASAC, FS, AV, b. 529, Russia.

26

About the history of the pavilion, designed by State architect Aleksei Shchusev, see the extensive collection of archive documents in Marianna Evstratova, Sergei Koluzakov (eds.), *Russian Pavilion in Venice. Alexei Schusev* (Moscow: Garage Museum of Contemporary Art, 2014).

27

Vladimir Goriainov, “Zritel’iam nash pavil’on nraivlsia”, *Artkhronika* 9, no. 7-8 (2007). In the interview Goriainov regards the exhibition held in 1990 as “his” last Biennale.

28

Leonid Bazhanov, “Vladimir Goriainov sdela mnoga dlia ‘Sovetskogo khudozhnika’ i sovetskikh khudozhnikov”, *The Art Newspaper Russia*, no. 7 (September 2013).

29

Leonid Bazhanov, cit. in Sandra Frimmel, “1993”, in Nikolay Molok (ed.), *Russian Artists at the Venice Biennale (1895-2013)*, 520.

30

Leonid Bazhanov to Achille Bonito Oliva, Moscow, March 18, 1993, ASAC, FS, AV, b. 529, Russia.

31

Leonid Bazhanov to Achille Bonito Oliva, Moscow, February 18, 1993, ASAC, FS, AV, b. 529, Russia.

32

Leonid Bazhanov, Minutes of the Commissioners meeting, July 3-4, 1992, ASAC, FS, AV, b. 518, Verbale della riunione, 52-53; Minutes of the Second Commissioners meeting, November 13-14, 1992, ASAC, FS, AV, b. 520, fasc. 7, 37-38.

Kabakov's project *The Red Pavilion* reflected upon the crisis in the former USSR, exemplified in the state of decay of the pavilion, which the artist deliberately left as such. He developed his piece as a dramaturgy in three acts. After entering a corridor filled with garbage, visitors had to pass by a construction site with rickety scaffolding, open paint buckets and waste material scattered throughout the halls, to finally access a terrace overlooking the lagoon [fig. 1]. Here the view extended over the red pavilion itself, adorned with Soviet flags and loudspeakers broadcasting military marches and political speeches, recorded and mixed by composer Vladimir Tarasov. The miniaturised building was conceived as an inaccessible, still familiar materialisation of a recent past. On its purpose, Kabakov wrote: "Socialism is beautiful, but it must remain only in the utopias of Iofan or Mayakovsky, and in no case must it be translated into reality. It is beautiful, but only from a distance".³³ From such a distance, the *Red Pavilion* revealed its innocuous, almost playful, nature: it was not painted in red, but in pink; its construction material was not solid like stone or concrete, but provisional and perishable like plywood. Its shape recalled *vysocki*, the eclectic, monumental high-rises erected in Moscow under Stalin; its reduced scale and pastel colours evoked a wedding cake, according to a mocking expression commonly used for Soviet post-WWII architecture, ascribing it to the category of *kitsch*.³⁴ Overall, the decrepit image of post-Soviet Russia, concealed behind the decorum of its façade, corroborated the characterisation of an entire nation as a "Giant with feet of clay", to sanction what Bonito Oliva had archaised in the catalogue as "Finis Russiae".³⁵

The *Red Pavilion* fully met the expectations of western critics and visitors, who were finally facing an art piece reflecting an allegedly autochthonous, i.e. Soviet, tradition. This put Kabakov on equal terms with western artists, by questioning "his" socialism, just as western artists were critical of "their" capitalism.³⁶ Hence, it should not surprise that the installation easily found a buyer, renowned German collector Peter Ludwig. Kabakov had promptly ensured him the installation for a major retrospective of Soviet art to be held at the Ludwig Museum in Cologne under the title *From Malevich to Kabakov* and scheduled to open in mid-October, just one week after the closure of the Biennale³⁷ [fig. 2]. Unbeknownst to the Biennale, Kabakov brought forward the dismantling of "his" pavilion by one month,³⁸ whose earlier closure was also announced on the booklet printed in Russian, Italian and English as accompanying text to the installation [fig. 3].

33

Ilya Kabakov, "Krasnyi pavil'on", 1993, in Ilya Kabakov, Boris Groys, *Dialogi* (Vologda: Biblioteka Moskovskogo Konceptualizma Germana Titova, 2010), 159-169, here 161. Here Kabakov refers to two personalities of Soviet culture: architect Boris Iofan (1891-1976) and poet Vladimir Mayakovsky (1893-1930).

34

In German as well, the term *Zuckerbäckerstil* is commonly used to refer to socialist multistory monumental architecture.

35

Achille Bonito Oliva, "Cardinal Points of Art", 10. Bonito Oliva adapted the formula from "Finis Austriae", used to refer to the dissolution of the Habsburg Empire after World War I.

36

Ekaterina Degot, "Russian Art at the Rendez-vous: Post-Soviet Russia at the Venice Biennale", in Nikolay Molok (ed.), *Russian Artists at the Venice Biennale (1895-2013)*, 80-95, here 83.

37

The exhibition catalogue features 27 works on paper and 3 installations, including the *Red Pavilion*, presented as the first outdoor installation ever realised by the artist. Evelyn Weiss (ed.), *Von Malewitsch bis Kabakow. Russische Avantgarde im 20. Jahrhundert. Die Sammlung Ludwig* (Cologne, Museum Ludwig, October 16, 1993 - January 2, 1994), exh. cat. (Munich-New York: Prestel, 1993), 246, 251. The exhibition title was in line with art market strategies adopted in West Germany in the Seventies, aimed at branding contemporary unofficial Soviet art – with Kabakov as a leading personality – as the "Second Russian Avant-garde", in continuity with Russian modernism and Malevich as one of its champions. See Elena Korwin, *Der Russen-boom. Sowjetische Ausstellungen als Mittel der Diplomatie in der BRD* (Cologne: Böhlau, 2015), 265-284.

38

Evelyn Weiss, Deputy Director of the Ludwig Museum, to Achille Bonito Oliva, Cologne, September 14, 1993, ASAC, FS, AV, b. 529, Russia. Emphasis in original (see footnote 40).

fig. 1

Two-page spread of the booklet exhibition catalogue "The Red Pavilion" designed by Ilya Kabakov, with the maps of the pavilion and of its location at Giardini, 1993. Courtesy Collection Sandretti Barbano

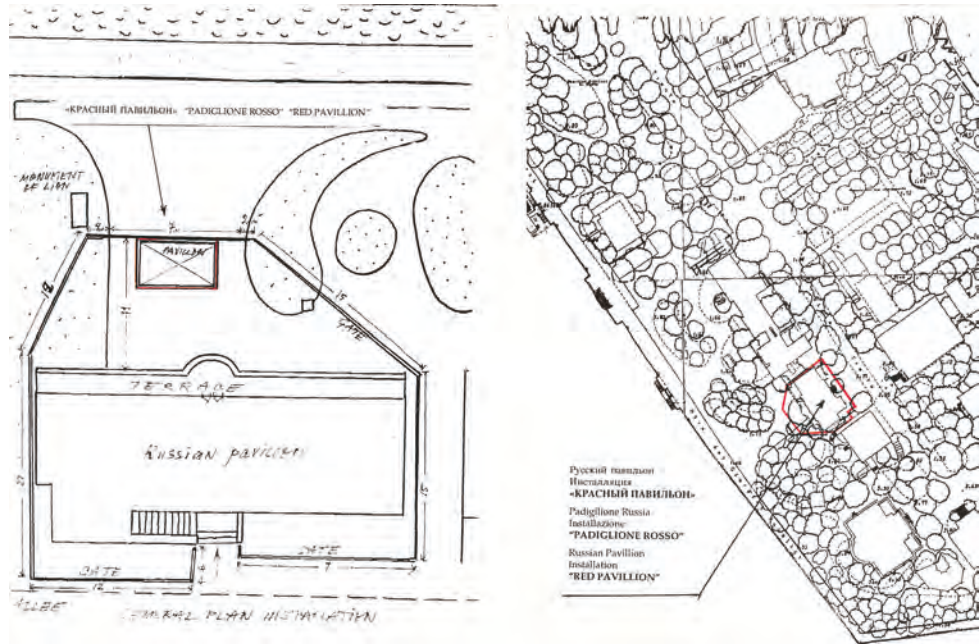


fig. 2

Front cover of the exhibition catalogue *Von Malewitsch bis Kabakow. Russische Avantgarde im 20. Jahrhundert. Die Sammlung Ludwig* (Cologne, Museum Ludwig, October 16, 1993 - January 2, 1994).

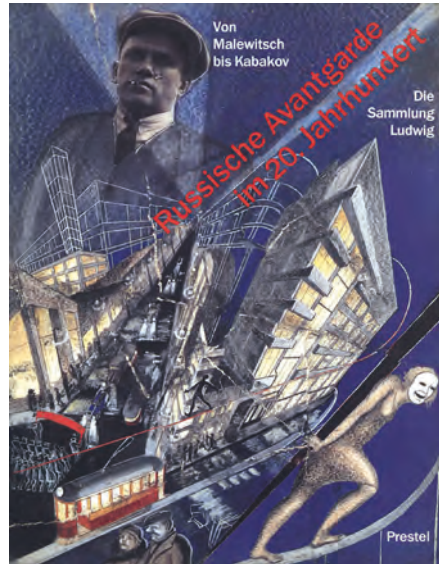


fig. 3

Front cover of the booklet exhibition catalogue "The Red Pavilion" designed by Ilya Kabakov, 1993. Courtesy Collection Sandretti Barbano



Further evidence of his personal appropriation of the exhibition was the omission on the brochure of any reference to the installation as a “national participation” of the Venice Biennale.³⁹ This self-publication was intended to compensate for the lack of information about the CIS participation in the general catalogue of the 45th Art Exhibition issued by the Biennale; in the section dedicated to the national participations, only two pages were granted to the CIS (while Germany had six), with no text and only one full-page reproduction of Kabakov’s installation *The Toilet*, presented in 1992 at documenta 9.

The de-regulated and private management of the pavilion was overtly stated in a fax sent by Ilya and Emilia Kabakov to Bonito Oliva:

I spoke today with Mr Bazhanov and he said that Russia has nothing to do with our installation. We can take it off any time we want and return the key from the Russian Pavilion to the office of Biennale. The pavilion didn’t have any commissioner this year, because the one who was supposed to be a commissioner was discharged and in hospital. They never appointed another person. Actually the person who was in charge was I. So, please, let us take the piece off immediately [...] It is an artist request to take this installation which is *his* work.⁴⁰

According to Boris Groys – one of Kabakov’s earliest promoters – such an act of private arrogation should be regarded as a prerequisite for putting an end to the communist legacy, as a practice of emancipation from the past and an axiom of an era in which “post-Communist art is produced largely by means of the privatisation of the mental and symbolic territory that had been left behind by Soviet ideology”.⁴¹

4. The “meta-pavilions” of Germany and Russia in Historical Perspective

Within the history of exhibitions, a comparable precedent of Russian-German confrontation can be found in the last pre-WWII large-scale art encounter, the World Expo held in 1937 in Paris, with the famed juxtaposition of the Nazi and Soviet pavilions [fig. 4]. The two buildings incarnated two opposing worldviews which would be defeated in the two preeminent ideological conflicts of the twentieth century: World War II and the Cold War.⁴² The architecture of both pavilions had championed modernised forms of classicism as an ideal pan-European style, with which even ideologically opposed nations could identify.⁴³

39

See *Krasnyi pavil'on, Padiglione rosso, Red Pavillion* [sic] (Pavilion of the Commonwealth of Independent States, La Biennale di Venezia, June 14 - September 14, 1993), exh. cat., in ASAC, FS, AV, b. 529, Russia. The poster advertising the exhibition reports the same partial information, see Boris Groys, David Ross, Iwona Blazwick, *Ilya Kabakov* (London: Phaidon, 1998), 22. In the closing acknowledgements, the booklet features, besides Pakesch and Ludwig, a series of first-ranking art professionals and institutions such as the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, the MoMA and Ronald Feldman Fine Arts in New York; Kasper König in Frankfurt; Dina Vierny in Paris; the Peggy Guggenheim Collection in Venice.

40

Emphasis in original. Emilia and Ilya Kabakov to Achille Bonito Oliva, New York, September 29, 1993, ASAC, FS, AV, b. 529, Russia.

41

Boris Groys, “Privatizations, or Artificial Paradises of Post-Communism”, in Boris Groys, *Art Power* (Cambridge-London: MIT Press, 2008), 164-171, here 166.

42

For an overview of the literature about the confrontation of National Socialism and Stalinism within the Paris Expo, see Danilo Udovički-Selb, “Facing Hitler’s Pavilion: The Uses of Modernity in the Soviet Pavilion at the 1937 Paris”, *Journal of Contemporary History* 47, no. 1 (January 2012): 13-47, especially note 8.

43

Otto Karl Werckmeister, “The Political Confrontation of the Arts. From the Great Depression to the Second World War, 1929-1939”, *Georges-Bloch-Jahrbuch des Kunsthistorischen Instituts der Universität Zürich*, no. 11/12, 2004/05 (2006): 143-175, here 160.

fig. 4

Postcard from the Paris World Expo, 1937. On the left: the German Pavilion. On the right: the Soviet Pavilion [Public domain: https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Paris-Expo-1937-carte_postale-01.jpg]



Soviet architect Boris Iofan designed the pavilion as a pedestal for the colossal, stainless-steel sculpture *The Worker and the Kolkhoz Woman* by Vera Mukhina⁴⁴. According to Slavoj Žižek, the extreme verticalisation of architecture is an eloquent demonstration of the oppressive character of socialist realism, whose works were conceived to be observed from below, hence from a reverential perspective, sublimating the ambition to omnipotence of the “new Soviet man”.⁴⁵ As it is well known, such a vertical magniloquence was taken over and expanded in the adjacent pavilion of Germany, designed by the Führer’s architect, Albert Speer.⁴⁶

In 1993, the two pavilions of Germany and Russia deployed again a similar strategy, this time not by erecting new magniloquent constructions, but rather by intervening on their existing premises and challenging their role as showcase of an alleged national character. A second common feature concerned the status of both Haacke and Kabakov within their respective domestic art scenes. On the one hand both were chiefly renowned abroad, while on the other they were part of their national cultural establishments, where they occupied a liminal space between official recognition and internal disputes. Haacke had created controversial pieces tackling German history and cultural memory but also the intertwinements between art, politics and the economy. One of his best-known works, *Der Pralinenmeister* (1981), highlighted the conflict of interests and the entanglement among private business, political involvement and artistic patronage in the activity of the already mentioned collector (and chocolate entrepreneur) Peter Ludwig.⁴⁷ Following such works, Haacke, soon labelled as “a synonym for *the* political artist internationally”, was declared persona non grata by several art institutions both in Germany and the United States.⁴⁸ A charismatic personality of Moscow Conceptualism since the late seventies, Kabakov could benefit at home from his international prominence only from the late Eighties onwards. With his

44

Dawn Ades, “Paris 1937. Art and the Power of Nations”, in Dawn Ades et al. (eds.), *Art and Power. Europe under the Dictators 1930-45*, (London, Hayward Gallery, October 26, 1995 - January 21, 1996, et al.), exh. cat. (London: Thames and Hudson-Hayward Gallery, 1995), 58-62, here 62.

45

Slavoj Žižek, *For They Know Not What They Do. Enjoyment as a Political Factor* (New York: Verso, 2002).

46

Vladimir Paperny, “Hot and Cold War in Architecture of Soviet Pavilions (1937-1959)”, in Rika Devos, Alexander Ortenberg, Vladimir Paperny (eds.), *Architecture of Great Expositions 1937-1959. Messages of Peace, Images of War* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2015), 81-98, here 88.

47

Hans Haacke, *Der Pralinenmeister* (Cologne, Galerie Paul Maenz, May 29 - June 27, 1981), exh. cat. (Cologne: Galerie Maenz, 1981).

48

As far as it concerns Haacke’s activity in the United States, it will be enough to mention his project based on real estate ownership and its connections to the art system, planned for 1971 at the Guggenheim Museum in New York, but later turned down. Consequently, in the following fifteen years no US museum offered him a solo show. As of 1993, only three museums from the United States and one from Germany owned an artist’s work. Walter Grasskamp, “No-Man’s Land”, 57-58.

participation in 1993, he paved the way in Venice to former “unofficial” Soviet artists as the “official” representatives of the new Russia. This new strategy was meant as a reaction to extinct Soviet ideology and a measure of rehabilitation for previously neglected or banned artists, while it externally aimed at an integration of post-socialist Russian art into the global market.⁴⁹

Kabakov and Haacke turned the two pavilions into the very object of their works, as already suggested in the title of both projects. The pavilion was no longer considered an empty shell or a white cube to host exhibits, but rather the subject matter itself on which to intervene with site-specific installations. It was not, however, a finished environment, but a space in progress, subject to a process of deconstruction that, following an avant-garde principle, tended to lay bare the structure and the foundation, to show the process and not the result, to propose an alternative perspective on the historical present. This “new vision” was suggested by a radical gesture, which did not imply any symbolic interrogation, but rather an act “material and violent in nature”.⁵⁰ Thus, while Germany gained international prominence as a reunited art-power, its pavilion evoked a demolition site; while the Commonwealth of Independent States emerged as the spectrum of a disintegrated world power, its pavilion recalled a construction site. Both Haacke and Kabakov looked back at the history of their home countries, and more precisely at their totalitarian past, when both nations were dominant and cohesive, and their pavilions in Venice ranked among the most anticipated and discussed. The two artists restated the centrality of the two pavilions into the miniature world of the Biennale, as a reminder of a more or less recent past, one echoed in the architecture of their art embassies. Haacke’s ruins recalled not only the rubble left by Nazism and WWII but also the debris of the Berlin Wall as the result of its progressive demolition by German authorities and citizens, thus producing in many visitors a visual shortcut for the images that had circulated worldwide just three years earlier. For his part, Kabakov stated: “This ‘little pavilion’ is a territory of a world that still exists, but one which is hiding behind the façade of the other. Poised at the rear of the backyard, it is awaiting its moment to return to its place, from which it was thrown out not so long ago”.⁵¹

Both exhibitions were constructed – as Walter Grasskamp put it – upon a dialogue between time and space⁵²: in time, as the interplay between the rubble (be they from the Nazi capitulation or the crumbling Berlin Wall) and the advent of the reunified Deutschland; and between the indoor Russian construction site and the fresh-varnished Soviet pavilion; in space, as the interaction between the inside and the outside, between the national and the international dimension, exemplified by the expansion of both exhibitions to the territory surrounding the pavilions. Paik’s multimedia installation and Kabakov’s fence, right down to the point of encircling but not isolating the two pavilions, exemplify “the transience in geographical and cultural boundaries, the insecurity of national identity” envisioned by Bonito Oliva.⁵³ At the same time the two artists challenged visitors to negotiate an exhibition fraught with barriers and obstructions, bringing into play their physical endurance and intellectual curiosity. In *Germania*, Haacke sketched out an effective “Topography of Terror”,⁵⁴ where entering visitors were forced to meet

49

Matteo Bertelé, “Ot ‘krasnogo pavil’ona’ k ‘zelenomu pavil’onu””, in Nikolai Molok (ed.), *Sovremennye russkie khudozhniki – uchastniki Venetsianskoi Biennale. Izbrannoe* (Saint Petersburg: Manezh, 2016), 18-27, here 24-25.

50

Michael Diers, “Germania a Margine. The German Pavilion in Venice and the Interventions of Art. An Historical Survey”, in Elke aus dem Moore, Ursula Zeller (eds.), *Germany’s Contributions to the Venice Biennale 1895-2007*, 33-53, here 46.

51

Ilya Kabakov, *Krasnyi pavil’on*.

52

See footnote 11.

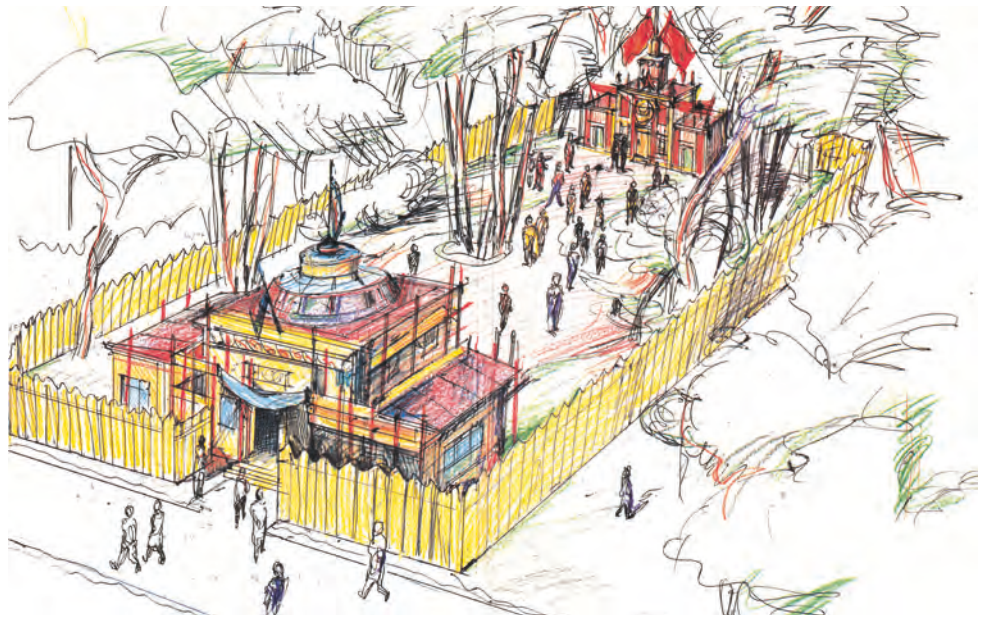
53

Achille Bonito Oliva, “Cardinal Points of Art”, 14.

54

Topographie des Terrors is a museum and documentation centre housed in the former location of the Third Reich Main Security Office, including SS and Gestapo headquarters, in the heart of Berlin. The project was initiated in 1987 to inform visitors of the terrors of Nazi Germany and today hosts outdoor and indoor permanent exhibitions, itinerant shows and a library.

fig. 5
Two-page spread of the booklet
exhibition catalogue "The
Red Pavilion" designed by Ilya
Kabakov, with a preliminary
sketch of the installation, 1993.
Courtesy Collection Sandretti
Barbano



the eyes of the Führer, and then to plunge into an arduous space, where every step was accompanied by a trampling and a stumbling through torn up floor tiles. As Kabakov recalled, at the sight of the fence enclosing the *Red Pavilion*, many visitors stepped back assuming it was still under construction.⁵⁵ Those who entered were finally rewarded with a view of the lagoon and the red pavilion itself. As already tested in previous installations, Kabakov designed a "psychological topography" of the Soviet Union, specifically aimed at Western audiences⁵⁶ [fig. 5]. As a result, both pavilions were assembled as synesthetic and engaging itineraries, albeit irritating and confusing ones.

This *modus operandi* was not new in the practice of both artists. In the sixties Haacke had coined the term "Real time system"⁵⁷ to designate a conceptual approach rooted in historical sociology and based on targeted surveys. The concept of *total'naia installiatsiia* (total installation) was developed by Kabakov in the Eighties, after his departure from the Soviet Union, as an ongoing embodiment of the dream, sought after by Wagner, of a *Gesamtkunstwerk* (the total work of art). His total installations were hence conceived and produced as full-scale, immersive, yet minimal reconstructions of the lost socialist context, where visitors could experience Soviet daily life through an accumulation of images, spaces, sounds and scents.⁵⁸

Haacke and Kabakov's pieces acted as catalysts of the cultural memory of the nations that they were called to represent. Cultural memory, as defined by Aleida Assmann, is an objectified and outsourced knowledge entrusted to institutional mediators who, through images and symbols, define an official political memory, hence a national identity. The main task of a museum consists in preserving artefacts that shape the "storage-memory" of a culture from which, in specific historical moments, useful elements can be selected and combined together to forge a "functional memory".⁵⁹ In both displays, the pavilion remains indeed

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For this reason, Kabakov had to put up an entrance sign to show the way. Ilya Kabakov, *Installations 1983-1995* (Paris, Centre Pompidou, May 17 - September 4, 1995), exh. cat. (Paris: Centre Pompidou, 1995), 186.

56

Nicole Seeberger, *Ilya Kabakov. Der Konzeptkünstler und das Dialogische* (Cologne: Böhlau, 2016), 61.

57

Walter Grasskamp, "No-Man's Land", 57.

58

Ilya Kabakov, *Über die "totale" Installation. O "total'noi" installiatsii. On the total installation* (Ostfildern: Hatje Cantz, 1995), 275-280.

59

Aleida Assmann, *Cultural Memory and Western Civilization. Arts of Memory* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 119-134.

the repository of an ephemeral memory “for export”, targeted at international audiences.⁶⁰ However, Haacke and Kabakov questioned the officially accepted cultural memory, turning the pavilion into an “anti-museum”, within a relentless debate “between memory-function and memory-archive, between remembrance and oblivion, consciousness and unconsciousness, evident and dormant”.⁶¹

As Groys recalled, the museum is defined as the institution devoted to the collection and preservation of the “new”, a repository for artefacts and documents whose *raison d'être* lies precisely in their *caesura* with the canonical tradition.⁶² Both Haacke and Kabakov defied the pretense of originality, innovation and uniqueness of this “new” art, intended as the last achievement within an evolutionary progress, by interrogating the pavilion’s status and legitimacy as a public display of an institutionalising memory. According to Haacke, the reunified German pavilion ought to incarnate one common memory, shared by the two former republics, as problematic as this might be. The most recent all-German (or German German) precedent at the Venice Biennale dated back to the national participations under the Third Reich, which the artist accordingly evoked. The shared memory among the Independent States of the Commonwealth dated back to the Soviet Union, as the inscription “URSS” (Italian for USSR) on the pavilion façade still reminded, and that Kabakov consequently addressed.

Several reviews reported on the emotional impact provoked by the two installations, with headlines such as *Death in Venice*, *Sinking Venice*, *Chaos* and *Apocalypse* [fig. 6].⁶³ Others identified the rubble as the quintessence of the current Biennale, with the two pavilions playing a leading role.⁶⁴ Art historian and former Biennale curator (1976-78) Enrico Crispolti foregrounded Haacke’s “rumbling” and Kabakov’s “chaotic but lively” pavilions as topical projects within a precarious art show, that he dubbed a “paper Biennale” [fig. 7].⁶⁵ The aesthetics of the rubble was particularly striking when compared to the environment surrounding the Biennale: Venice, a city devoid of any debris – not to say ruins – of its glorious past. A city where restorative policies towards its conspicuous cultural heritage had always dictated to reconstruct, when needed, “as it was, where it was”, as it was the case after the collapse of St Mark’s Campanile in 1903 or after the devastating fire of *La Fenice* theatre in 1996. In the name of a dogmatic restoration of the city, sanctioned by laxity and paralysis, the lagoon city was destined to repress any attempt to reflect upon, rethink and possibly innovate its history, leaving no trace of its past, always deceptively contemporary, yet timeless.⁶⁶ According to the distinction between

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See Sandra Frimmel, “Kak pokazivat’ Rossiui v Venetsii”, *Artkhronika* 5, no. 1 (2003): 22-29. In the case of the Soviet pavilion, art historian Andrei Kovalev writes about “double standards” in selecting artists for either international or domestic venues. Andrei Kovalev, “Empty Space? The Soviet Pavilion during the Cold War”, in Nikolay Molok (ed.), *Russian Artists at the Venice Biennale (1895-2013)*, 70-78, here 73-74.

61

Tiziana Gislimberti, *Mappe della memoria. L'ultima generazione tedesco-orientale si racconta* (Milano: Mimesis, 2009), 106.

62

Boris Groys, *On the New*, in Boris Groys, *Art Power*, 23-42.

63

See Michael Kimmelman, “Death in Venice”, *The New York Times*, June 27, 1993: 1; Viktor Miziano, “Tonushchaia Venetsiia”, *Khudozhestvennyi zhurnal*, no. 1 (1993); Marco Rosci, “Americani nell'irrealtà, ex sovietici apocalittici”, *La stampa*, June 14, 1993: 15. Art historian Luciano Caramel wrote about a “general feeling of apocalypses”, while art critic Pierre Restany about “a current geopolitical and ideological chaos”, both openly referring to the German pavilion (cit. in Gabriella de Marco, Carlo A. Bucci, “Gran bazar del caos con remake”, *L'Unità*, June 13, 1993: 17).

64

Petra Kipphoff, “Bodenlos in den Gärten der Kunst”, *Die Zeit*, June 18, 1993: 53; “Führers Trümmer”, *Der Spiegel*, no. 24, June 13: 26-27; Frederika Randall, “Biennale: News on the Rialto”, *The Wall Street Journal*, June 30, 1993: 12; Hervé Gauville, “La marathon de Venise”, *Libération*, June 16, 1993: 1, 14. About the Italian reception of the German pavilion, see also Petra Schaefer, *GERMANIA – Italienische Kritik der deutschen Beiträge seit 1990*, in Jan May, Sabine Meine (eds.), *Der deutsche Pavillon*, 127-140, here 131-133; about the reception of the CIS pavilion, Sandra Frimmel, “1993”, in Nikolay Molok (ed.), *Russian Artists at the Venice Biennale (1895-2013)*, 520-522.

65

Enrico Crispolti, “Una Biennale di carta”, *L'Unità*, June 13, 1993: 17.

66

Salvatore Settis, *Se Venezia muore* (Torino: Einaudi, 2014), 122-132.

fig. 6
Marco Rosci, "Americani nell'irrealtà, ex sovietici apocalittici", *La stampa*, June 14, 1993. In the reproduction, the two-page spread designed by Hans Haacke for the Biennale's general catalogue with key elements of his *Germania* installations (photograph of Hitler's visit at the Venice Biennale in 1934; the plastic oversized replica of a 1 *Deutschmark* coin from 1990, the year of the monetary union).



fig. 7
A full page of the daily newspaper "L'Unità" dedicated to the opening of the 45th Venice Art Biennale, June 13, 1993. Below the title of Enrico Crispolti's review, "Una Biennale di carta", an installation view of the German pavilion with visitors.



ruins and rubble provided by Marc Augé, the latter presents no cultural value as the consequence of an intentional act of destruction, therefore it needs to be removed as soon as possible.⁶⁷ In the microcosm of Giardini, the rubble, even if in the form of artefacts, offered tangible remnants of the end of an era, tangible in the true sense of the word, since pieces of the torn floor and discarded objects soon became souvenirs that visitors began to take home, as had already happened with fragments of the Berlin Wall.

The wide affinity from public and critics towards the two pavilions culminated with the art prizes awarded by the international jury: Germany received the Golden Lion for best national participation, in accordance with “the trans-national spirit of the present Biennale”,⁶⁸ while Kabakov, along with Louise Bourgeois, Joseph Kosuth and Jean Pierre Raynaud, was awarded an honorable mention.

5. Transnationalism Versus Trans(it)nationalism

The application of the claimed principles of “transnationality” and “coexistence” into the exhibitionary practice was eventually attuned to the disparate agendas of the growing national participations. A transnational representation within national pavilions was made possible in a few cases, such as the Israeli pavilion, which hosted Japanese Gutai artist Jiro Yoshihara, and the Austrian pavilion, which presented US and Swiss artists Andrea Fraser and Christian Philipp Müller, along with Austrian Gerwald Rockenschau. In other premises, the call for transnationality provided the chance to celebrate the origins or the new homeland of world-renowned artists, as it was the case respectively with Joseph Kosuth hosted in the Hungarian pavilion and Louise Bourgeois representing the United States of America. Besides such cases, none of the other pavilions were ready to make room for alien artists. As the Commissioner of the Czech Republic stated, “the idea was noble, but out of reality”.⁶⁹

While on one side Bonito Oliva made frequent use of expressions such as “circulation of the art global village” and “intercontinental spirit of the Biennale”, on the other he had to come to terms with the fact that he had no supervision over national pavilions. He eventually advanced less ambitious and more pragmatic solutions, such as inviting commissioners to consider the option to accompany the exhibition of one “emblematic” national artist with a parallel show open to “pavilionless” artists. This option was mainly motivated by the circumstance that no space was left over, neither in the Central Pavilion nor at Giardini, for new national participations. Therefore, advocating for pavilionless artists to be hosted in already established premises was an attempt to think outside of the box of the idea of the nation. He also encouraged bilateral dynamics since “like in a marriage, things happen in two; matches and pairings may arise from historical, diplomatic and cultural affinities”.⁷⁰

Even the much-awarded German pavilion presented two artists whose presence, rather than proving a transnational attitude, testified to the international attractiveness of Germany in accordance with a grand national narrative which was at odds with Bonito Oliva’s original intentions. Germany’s openness and receptiveness towards new geographies, starting from its “close Other”, ultimately

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Marc Augé, *Le temps en ruines* (Paris: Galilée, 2003), 45

68

La Biennale di Venezia: le esposizioni internazionali d'arte, 1895-1995 (Milano: Electa, 1996), 212. The international jury was headed by Luciano Anceschi and composed of Giovanni Carandente, Julia Kristeva, Steingrim Laursen, Katharina Schmidt and Nicholas Serota.

69

Magdalena Juříková, Minutes of the Commissioners meeting, July 3-4, 1992, ASAC, FS, AV, b. 518, Verbale della riunione, 52.

70

Achille Bonito Oliva, Minutes of the Commissioners meeting, July 3-4, 1992, ASAC, FS, AV, b. 518, Verbale della riunione, 10.

proved a failure. Judging from the archival findings, no art institution or personality from former East-Germany was invited nor considered in the making process of the national reunified pavilion, reinforcing allegations of cultural imperialism as a one-sided west-driven process.

Rather than reflecting a contemporary transnational spirit, Haacke and Kabakov's projects reflected on the construction process of the brand new (the reunified Federal Republic of Germany) or temporary (the Commonwealth of Independent States) political bodies that they were called to represent. Instead of a transnationalism, we could postulate, as hinted by Ricci, a trans(it)nationalism.⁷¹ With their emphasis on construction sites and rubble, both projects questioned practices of national construction, myth making and identity building, in the wake of the debates that emerged in the previous decade under Wende and Perestroika which inevitably brought about the dissolution of the geo-political status quo.

The transitional nature of the 1993 Biennale was also evident within the national participations of Central, Eastern and South-Eastern Europe, hence among those nations geographically and historically close to Germany and Russia. That was the case with two socialist federal republics dissolved under the new world order such as Yugoslavia and Czechoslovakia, whose pavilions raised issues about the legitimacy of their new owners. After the partitioning of Czechoslovakia into the Czech and Slovak Republics, its pavilion in Venice was accordingly split into two separate – yet inevitably interconnected – sub-pavilions. Yet from the 2000's onward, the two countries began to alternate every two years.⁷² Since no agreement was found among the former republics of Yugoslavia by 1993, its pavilion was taken over by the Biennale to host the exhibition *Macchine di Pace*, while Croatia, Macedonia and Slovenia found proper venues for their first independent participations. Only two years later, in view of the 1995 Centennial Biennale, these pavilions found a permanent arrangement: the Yugoslavian one was taken over by Serbia and has been managed in Belgrade ever since, the German one finally underwent a ground-breaking restoration, while the inscription "URSS" was removed from the façade of the CIS pavilion and replaced with "Russia".

6. The Afterlife of the Two Pavilions

The projects presented by Haacke and Kabakov in 1993 stand as milestones in the history of their respective pavilions, providing a significant precedent for future exhibitions held in the same premises. In both cases, a series of projects undertaken since 1993 have turned the pavilion's architecture into a disruptive, yet productive, artistic medium. Within the halls of the German pavilion, the first eloquent case dates to 2001, when Gregor Schneider, with *Totes Haus u r – 2001*, remodelled the building after his private house in Germany into a claustrophobic space by means of pits, tunnels and fake doors. A second example can be found ten years later with the construction of a chapel of rest, the *Church of Fear vs. The Alien Within*, a posthumous tribute to appointed artist Christoph Schlingensief, who had passed away a few months before the Biennale opening. Finally, in 2017 Anne Imhof with *Faust* altered the proportions of the building by blocking the main entrance and installing bullet-proof glass floors and walls to host live performances. It is noteworthy that all three mentioned projects were awarded the Golden Lion for best national participation, proving once more the potential of the pavilion as an effective artistic and curatorial tool. The most explicit reference to *Germania*, however, was presented in 2022 with *Relocating a Structure* by Maria Eichhorn, who laid bare the pavilion's historical and ideological stratifications by revealing its multiple renovation and correction plans through excavations and bricked-up

71

Clarissa Ricci, "From Obsolete to Contemporary", 24.

72

Alexandra Kusá, "Slovak-Czech Participation", in Veronika Wolf (ed.), *Pavilion of the Czech Republic and the Slovak Republic in Venice* (Prague: Národní galerie, 2013): 98.

doors. Like Haacke thirty years before, Eichhorn grounded her project on historical research and scholarly contributions by Biennale experts to the catalogue, which also featured a timeline showing the problematic history of the building. The German press discussed the project by inevitably referring to Haacke's *Germania* as a historical touchstone and visual benchmark.⁷³ In turn, *Relocating a Structure* prompted a posthumous recognition of Haacke's project, which back in 1993 – as the artist recalls in a conversation with Eichhorn printed in the same catalogue – had received a dismissive response from German State institutions and art critics.⁷⁴

As far as it concerns the afterlife of Kabakov's piece, it will be enough to mention *The Green Pavilion*, presented in 2015 by Irina Nakhova. Emerging from the Moscow underground art scene in the Eighties, in Venice Nakhova created a multimedia installation which manifestly resounded not only with the *Red Pavilion* but also with the history of the building itself, unveiled one century before from external green walls.⁷⁵ Through minimal interventions, Nakhova intended to “dissolve” the pavilion into its surroundings, in the green of Venice's main public gardens and in the blue of the lagoon.⁷⁶ It is noteworthy that neither colours declared by Kabakov and Nakhova matched with the eventual shade of the walls, with the first one being pink and the latter, according to most visitors, blue, hence producing in many visitors a shift between expectation and perception.⁷⁷

In his inquiry into “the geopolitics of architecture” at the Biennale, art historian Joel Robinson regards Haacke's *Germania* as the first “critical interrogation of the ideological nature of the built landscape” at Giardini,⁷⁸ paving the way for a plethora of artistic interventions in the following decades questioning the political implications embodied by pavilions. Similarly, Ricci recalls that the 1993 Biennale, through its insistence on the “transnational”, prompted a conscious approach to the otherwise outdated national participations.⁷⁹ This aspect contributes towards reassessing the impact of the 45th Exhibition, as anticipated in the title of her essays, as a “contemporary Venice Biennale” for demonstrating the potentiality of national pavilions as both subject and object of artistic and curatorial practices, questioning the history, the geo-politics and ultimately the infrastructure of the Venice Biennale, in a highly Institutional Critique spirit.

For these reasons, the two projects can be considered pioneering artistic experiments of “meta-pavilions”, before the term “pavilion” was consciously used and readapted as a curatorial device to provide the Venice Biennale with a new, yet self-reflecting, narrative and structure. That happened in 2011 with the Biennale titled *ILLUMInations*, when curator Bice Curiger rejected the allegations of anachronism applied to pavilions, by inviting four artists to create, in the framework of the international show, four “para-pavilions” intended as “meta-objects” to host the works of other artists intended to epitomise the dialogical nature of pavilions.⁸⁰

73

Ulrike Knöfel, “Unsere Frau in Venedig”, *Der Spiegel*, no. 17 (2022); Adam Szymczyk, “Maria Eichhorn”, *Frieze*, no. 226 (April 2022); Ilke Becker, “Durcharbeiten der Widerstände”, *Texte zur Kunst*, no. 127 (September 2022).

74

Interview with Haacke, in Yilmaz Dziewior (ed.), *Maria Eichhorn. Relocating a Structure* (German Pavilion, 59th International Art Exhibition. La Biennale di Venezia, April 23 - November 27, 2022), exh. cat. (Cologne: Verlag der Buchhandlung Walther und Franz König, 2022), 126-127.

75

Margarita Tupitsyn, “The Russian World: A Hare or a Bear?”, in Margarita Tupitsyn (ed.), *The Green Pavilion* (Russian Pavilion, 56th International Art Exhibition. La Biennale di Venezia, May 9 - November 22, 2015), exh. cat. (Moscow: Stella Art Foundation, 2015), 34-41.

76

Irina Nakhova, “Artist's Statement”, in Margarita Tupitsyn (ed.), *The Green Pavilion*, 29.

77

Matteo Bertelé, “Ot ‘krasnogo pavil’ona’ k ‘zelenomu pavil’onu’”, 25-27.

78

Joel Robinson, “Folkloric Modernism: Venice's Giardini della Biennale and the Geopolitics of Architecture”, *Open Arts Journal*, no. 2 (Winter 2013 - 2014): 6, <http://dx.doi.org/10.5456/issn.2050-3679/2013w04jr>

79

Clarissa Ricci, “Towards a Contemporary Venice Biennale”: 96.

80

Bice Curiger, “Para-Pavilions”, in Bice Curiger (ed.), *ILLUMInations* (54th International Art Exhibition. La Biennale di Venezia, June 4 - November 27, 2011), exh. cat. (Venice: La Biennale di Venezia-Marsilio, 2011), 301-316, here 303.

In 2017, Christine Macel created within her curatorial show titled *Viva Arte Viva* nine pavilions, that she also named “trans-pavilions”, for being “transnational by nature” while echoing the “Biennale’s historical organization into pavilions”.⁸¹

The primary role of the two pavilions was recently reasserted even by the Biennale itself in the framework of a documentary exhibition organised in 2020 in Venice by the Historical Archives of Contemporary Arts (ASAC) under the headline *The Disquieted Muses. When La Biennale di Venezia Meets History* (2022).⁸² In the exhibition catalogue, Cecilia Alemani highlighted the role and prominence of Kabakov’s and Haacke’s installations as “meditations in which the concept of nationality was not only a theme but almost a means of expression”,⁸³ hence as eloquent artistic contributions to a transition – paraphrasing the exhibition’s section and catalogue’s chapter that she curated – “from nation states to a global Biennale”.⁸⁴

81

Christine Macel, “Viva Arte Viva Arte Viva Arte Viva Arte Viva Arte Viva Arte”, in Christine Macel (ed.), *Viva Arte Viva* (57th International Art Exhibition. La Biennale di Venezia, May 13 - November 26, 2017), exh. cat. (Venice: La Biennale, 2017), 16-31, here 16.

82

In the exhibition, a section was devoted to a selection of national pavilions presented at the 45th Exhibition which included Germany, Russia and Great Britain. For an exhaustive exhibition review, see Clarissa Ricci, Marie Tavinor, “Musing with the Muses: the Venice Biennale’s Anniversary Exhibition”, *Journal of Modern Italian Studies* 26, no. 4 (2021): 482-501, <https://doi.org/10.1080/1354571X.2021.1943898>

83

Cecilia Alemani, “The national pavilions in 1993: Hans Haacke, Richard Hamilton, Ilya Kabakov”, in ASAC, *Le muse inquiete. La Biennale di Venezia di fronte alla storia / The Disquieted Muses. When La Biennale di Venezia Meets History* (Venice, La Biennale di Venezia, August - November 2020) exh. cat. (Venice: La Biennale di Venezia, 2020), 382.

84

Cecilia Alemani, “90s. From Nation States to a Global Biennale” in ASAC, *Le muse inquiete / The Disquieted Muses*, 358-384.

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OBOE	Journal On Biennials and Other Exhibitions	Studies on the Venice Biennale: National Pavilions	Vol. 5, No. 1 (2024)
	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		
OBOE Journal On Biennials and Other Exhibitions ISSN 2724-086X obojournal.com	Published online: December 31, 2024 To cite this article: Ughetta Molin Fop “Art and Politics at the Venice Biennale: The Portuguese case”, <i>OBOE Journal</i> 5, no. 1 (2024): 138-150 To link to this article: https://doi.org/10.25432/2724-086X/5.1.0009		

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-

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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 Mari, *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

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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 examples 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, inter-state 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 française d'action artistique (ed.), *La France à Venise: Le pavillon français de 1948 à 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 pavilion¹⁴. 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 six 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,

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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, "Curatorial 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

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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", *Mídia & 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).

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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.

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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 Libreria 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

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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 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 Lúcia 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

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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

Lúcia 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.

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Lúcia 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.

Noteworthy, 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 Biennial provide sufficient justification, having coexisted with that in Venice for almost forty years. Likewise, the Europalia⁵⁴ 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 Albuquerque, 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.

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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.

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“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

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Documents from Patricia Salvação Barreto (SEC) to João Diogo Nunes Barata (Portuguese Ambassador in Rome) November 28, 1994 and to João 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

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

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Laufrey Helgadóttir, “Icelanders at the Venice Biennale”, in *Sýning sýninganna: Island í Feneyjum í 50 ár. 50 years of Icelandic art at the Venice Biennale* (Reykjavík: Reykjavík Art Museum, 2011), 24.

61

Marijan Susovski, “Introduction”, in Košćević, 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 alla 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).

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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

This work was funded by the Portuguese *Fundação para a Ciência e a Tecnologia* (SFRH/BD/87796/2012).

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

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	Illuminating Identity: Two Visions of Israeli Cultural Politics at the 2011 Venice Biennale Rachel Kubrick Abstract At the 54th Venice Biennale in 2011, two internationally acclaimed Israeli artists, Sigalit Landau and Yael Bartana, representing Israel and Poland respectively, presented diverging expressions of their Israeli national identity whilst also engaging with the lasting impact of the Holocaust in Israeli collective memory. Bartana’s film trilogy <i>And Europe Will Be Stunned</i> (2007-2011) considers this history head-on, imagining an alternative present in which an activist movement sparks an exodus of Jews from Israel back to their pre-Holocaust home of Poland, in a revolutionary reversal of Zionist principles. Landau’s contribution also creates innovative solutions to questions of Israeli identity and politics. In <i>One Man’s Floor is Another Man’s Feelings</i>, Landau installed various environments using themes of water, land, and salt, referencing the natural border of the Dead Sea between Israel and Jordan. Her work considers the construction of a salt bridge between the two nations, and uses the motif of empty shoes as a reminder of the Holocaust. This paper delves specifically into the expression of national identity and the critique of nationalism that both artists presented at the Biennale, raising questions of transnationalism for future iterations of the exhibition. Keywords Yael Bartana, Sigalit Landau, Israel, Poland, Holocaust Studies, Venice Biennale, National Pavilions Author’s Note Please be advised that, despite the publication date, this article was originally written in 2020 and revised in early 2023, prior to the outbreak of the Israel-Hamas War.		
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Illuminating Identity: Two Visions of Israeli Cultural Politics at the 2011 Venice Biennale

Rachel Kubrick

Introduction

In October 2010, Bice Curiger, Artistic Director of the 54th Venice Biennale, announced the theme of *ILLUMInations*, sparking discussions of nationalism and globalism.¹ The first part of the title draws attention to the use of light in the paintings of the Venetian Renaissance artist Tintoretto.² The second half, “nations”, explicitly highlights what has become a somewhat contentious aspect of the Biennale – the tradition of National Pavilions. Curiger acknowledged this controversy in the exhibition press release: “Sometimes the Pavilions of the Biennale are considered anachronistic; on the contrary they can be a tool to reflect upon the issue of identity”.³

Over a century prior to 2011’s *ILLUMInations*, questions of nationhood in the context of a cosmopolitan biennial were already being considered. *La Biennale di Venezia* was inaugurated in 1895 as a new art-focused and industry-less alternative to the ubiquitous world’s fairs and universal expositions popular at the time, albeit one that utilised the same national framework.⁴ The similarly cosmopolitan Olympics – to which the Venice Biennale is frequently compared – was founded just a year earlier in 1894.⁵ Caroline Jones identifies both events as “theaters of representation” founded in the second half of the 19th century, “a time of expansionist nationalism”.⁶ Given this history, the Biennale pavilions have

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Jennifer Allen, “International News Digest”, *Artforum International*, October 25, 2010, <https://www.artforum.com/news/international-news-digest-26706>, accessed May 2022.

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“ILLUMInations – Giardini”, *Universes in Universe*, October 22, 2010, <https://universes.art/en/venice-biennale/2011/tour/illuminations>, accessed May 2022.

3

Universes in Universe, “ILLUMInations – Giardini”; Bice Curiger, *ILLUMInations: La Biennale Di Venezia 54. Esposizione Internazionale D'Arte* (Venice: Marsilio, 2011), 44; Bice Curiger, “We are Working with Art Here” Bice Curiger on the Venice Biennale”, interview by Barnaby Drabble, *Metropolis M*, June 11, 2011, https://www.metropolism.com/en/features/22642_we_are_working_with_art_here, accessed May 2022.

4

Caroline A. Jones. *The Global Work of Art : World's Fairs, Biennials, and the Aesthetics of Experience* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2017), 84.

5

Ibid., 94.

6

Ibid.

been called “the international art world’s glamorous graveyard to national cultural identity”.⁷

Such questions of national identity especially came into play with the 2011 Polish and Israeli Pavilions, both of which exhibited work by Israeli-born artists – Yael Bartana and Sigalit Landau.⁸ In this article, Bartana’s and Landau’s respective exhibitions will be used as a case study to explore the divergent expressions and criticisms of nationalism that emerged especially in the Israeli and Jewish diasporic contexts, ultimately proposing transnationalism as a more fitting guide for future biennials in an increasingly global art world.

The State of Israel itself is indebted to nationalism in its foundations and its continued survival as a nation for the Jewish people. It is therefore unsurprising that the idea of nation is a primary feature of both exhibitions. According to political scientist Benedict Anderson, nations as “imagined communities” emerged through recognised commonalities across a vast population, developing especially on linguistic grounds.⁹ Israel, however, diverges from this traditional definition as its nationhood is derived from an imagined community rooted in a common faith across a multilingual and ethnically diverse Jewish diaspora.

Jewish nationalism found its voice in the late 19th century with the Zionist movement, which historically aimed to “normalise the status of the Jewish people and transform it into a national group like all other nations in the modern geopolitical space”, according to Dmitry Shumsky.¹⁰ Although Zionism evolved into various branches with differing goals and ideologies, generally speaking, the movement came to fruition in modern geopolitics as the State of Israel. Accordingly, both Bartana and Landau will be explored primarily in terms of their Israeli national identity, rather than their Jewish national identity. One must acknowledge the difference between the Jewish diaspora as a nation across time and place, and today’s nation-state, the State of Israel, which naturally comprises groups of various religions and backgrounds, despite the apparent desires of the current, far-right leadership.

In the Israeli Pavilion, Sigalit Landau worked at the juncture of sculpture, video, and installation with her exhibition *One Man’s Floor is Another Man’s Feelings*. Landau’s work is ingrained in her homeland. She has used the Dead Sea as an outdoor studio space since 2004, including for her piece for the Biennale.¹¹ Abby McKenzie and Mimi Gillman succinctly describe this practice as the “use of the physicality of the land of Israel itself as a medium”.¹² Meanwhile, Israeli video artist and photographer Yael Bartana has established herself within the Jewish diaspora, or what Irit Rogoff calls “the Diaspora’s diaspora”, emigrating from Israel

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Felicity Fenner, “As We Face Pressing Global Issues, the Pavilions of Venice Biennale Are a 21st Century Anomaly”, *The Conversation*, May 17, 2019, <https://theconversation.com/as-we-face-pressing-global-issues-the-pavilions-of-venice-biennale-are-a-21st-century-anomaly-117078>, accessed May 2022.

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It should be noted that the Artistic Director’s curatorial theme for the Central Pavilion does not need to be followed by the curators of the National Pavilions in the Arsenale and Giardini or those of the collateral events. For an in-depth discussion of the biennale’s structure, see Vittoria Martini, “The Evolution of an Exhibition Model: Venice Biennale as an Entity in Time”, *OnCurating* 46 (June 2020): 479-493.

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Benedict Anderson, “Imagined Communities”, in John Hutchinson and Anthony Smith (eds.), *Nationalism*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994), 89–96.

10

Dmitry Shumsky, *Beyond the Nation-State: The Zionist Political Imagination from Pinsker to Ben-Gurion* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2018), 220.

11

Sigalit Landau in David Goss (ed.), *Sigalit Landau – Salt Years* (Berlin: Hatje Cantz Verlag, 2019), n.p.

12

Sigalit Landau, “Exploring Inherited Identities”, interview by Abby McKenzie and Mimi Gillman, *Keen on Protest*, July 15, 2016, <http://protest.keenonmag.com/sigalitlandau/>, accessed March 2020.

to live between Amsterdam and Berlin.¹³ Perhaps appropriately, she also exhibited her film trilogy *And Europe Will Be Stunned* at the Biennale outside of an Israeli context. Bartana represented Poland, a nation deeply rooted in Israeli collective memory for its connection to the Holocaust, and where, like many Israeli and diasporic Jews, Bartana has ancestral ties.

Both artists therefore dissect the notion of a collective Israeli consciousness, raising questions of how Israelis can connect amongst themselves but especially with other nations. Existing in an inadvertent juxtaposition, with the Israeli and Polish pavilions situated just a short walk across the canal in the Giardini, *And Europe Will Be Stunned* and *One Man's Floor is Another Man's Feelings* put forth different expressions of national identity and critiques of nationalism by creating new political fictions and realities, fitting for citizens of a nation where politics are ever-present.

The Polish Pavilion: Yael Bartana

Much of Yael Bartana's work takes the form of "pre-enactments", a term coined by the artist in reference to "a methodology that commingles fact and fiction, prophecy and history".¹⁴ Through these pre-enactments, Bartana looks to disrupt collective memory and "to enable the political imagining of an alternative reality".¹⁵ Her pre-enactments are designed to spark thought and action, encouraging her audience to interrogate their own history and identity, two themes that permeate her practice.¹⁶ As discussed in the following section, Bartana's Venice Biennale exhibition imagines an alternative national reality – in which she employs a convincing narrative to disrupt assumptions of Zionism and what a home for the Jewish diaspora should be.

Her entry for the 2011 Polish Pavilion, *And Europe Will Be Stunned*, comes in three parts: *Mary Koszmary (Nightmares)* (2007), *Mur i wieża (Wall and Tower)* (2009), and *Zamach (Assassination)* (2011). Each film calls for a political interpretation, engaging with questions of identity and history for both the Polish and Israeli nations. The video trilogy considers an alternative solution to the so-called 'Jewish question' after the Holocaust, essentially proposing a reversal of Zionism.¹⁷

The first film, *Mary Koszmary (Nightmares)* (2007), introduces the Jewish Renaissance Movement in Poland (JRMiP), a fictional political group, through a speech by the movement's founder [fig. 1]. The film is reminiscent of World War II propaganda, but the near emptiness of the setting, a Warsaw sports stadium, adds a layer of irony and unease to proceedings.¹⁸ This passionate speech calling for the Jewish return to Poland concludes with young followers stenciling the following motto into the grass: "3,300,000 Jews can change the lives of 40,000,000 Poles".¹⁹

In the second film, *Mur i wieża (Wall and Tower)* (2009), the Jewish

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Olga Gershenson, "Meta-Memory: About the Holocaust in New Israeli Video Art", *Jewish Film & New Media: An International Journal* 6, no. 1 (2018): 67-90, <https://www.muse.jhu.edu/article/725823>, accessed May 2022; "Bartana_CV_0521", *Yael Bartana*, <https://yaelbartana.com/files/pages/2021/09/Bartana-CV-0521.pdf>, accessed May 2022.

14

Yael Bartana, "Interview with Artist Yael Bartana", *Aesthetica*, August 26, 2014, <https://www.aestheticamagazine.com/interview-artist-yael-bartana/>, accessed May 2022.

15

Yael Bartana, "The Impossible Possible", interview by Sarah James, *Art Monthly* no. 450 (October 2021): 4.

16

Ibid.

17

Yael Bartana, "A Conversation between Yael Bartana, Galit Eilat and Charles Esche", interview with Galit Eilat and Charles Esche, in Joa Ljungberg and Andreas Nilsson (eds.), *Yael Bartana - And Europe Will Be Stunned* (Berlin: Revolver, 2010), 116, 168.

18

Joa Ljungberg, "A Dizzying Appeal for Reconciliation", in Ljungberg and Nilsson (eds.), *Yael Bartana - And Europe Will Be Stunned*, 16.

19

Ibid.

fig. 1

Yael Bartana. *Mary Koszmary (Nightmares)*, 2007. Video still of one channel video and sounds installation, 11". Image courtesy of Annet Gelink Gallery, Amsterdam and Foksal Gallery Foundation, Warsaw.



fig. 2

Yael Bartana. *Mur i wieża (Wall and Tower)*, 2009. Video still of one channel video and sounds installation, 15". Image courtesy of Annet Gelink Gallery, Amsterdam, and Sommer Contemporary Art, Tel Aviv.



return comes to fruition. The JRMiP build a *kibbutz*, a communal settlement native to Israel, in the Warsaw Ghetto, thereby flipping the powerful symbol of the Israeli pioneer, *halutz*.²⁰ These pioneers become the new “bearer of the national mission, paving the way for national redemption”, as the original *halutzim* have been described [fig. 2].²¹ Once completed, they hoist up a flag depicting the JRMiP symbol, the Jewish star of David emerging from behind the emblematic Polish eagle.

The last and longest film, *Zamach (Assassination)* (2011), conveys the final act of the JRMiP’s origin story: the funeral of its founder after his mysterious assassination. An unidentified amount of time has passed since the events of the previous films, during which the movement has grown so that the funeral is completely packed with mourners, reminiscent of a rally. Various figures speak on behalf of their martyred leader as the audience waves posters with powerful slogans and flags of the JRMiP’s star-eagle symbol. A new chapter has arrived for this revolutionary movement in the wake of his death. As Bartana describes, “It is by means of this symbolic death that the myth of the new political movement is unified – a movement which can become a concrete project to be implemented in Poland, Europe, or the Middle East in the days to come”.²²

Rather than campaigning for a Jewish homeland and encouraging Jews to move there, the films advocate for an exodus from Israel to the European nations from which they were forced out. This reversal of the Right of Return for all Jews to immigrate to Israel is exemplified by the backwards-playing music of the Israeli national anthem, *Hatikvah*, in two of the films.²³ This idea frames those who left the ‘motherland’ to escape European anti-Semitism and genocide, as a diaspora in exile. This is opposed to the typical view of Jews living outside the Biblical homeland of Israel as being in an undesirable diasporic state. As Bartana explains, “there are different streams within Zionism, but one of them is that all Jews should be in Israel. So it goes against that stream”.²⁴

Overly provocative, Bartana’s concept sparked interest internationally, especially in regard to its Polish setting. It was the first time a non-Polish citizen represented Poland at the Biennale.²⁵ The exhibition received much praise, such as in Jason Edward Kaufman’s otherwise negative review of the Biennale for the *Washington Post*, in which he argued that Bartana’s work stood out as “compelling”, or in Kaelen Wilson-Goldie’s review for *Frieze*, in which she exalted *And Europe Will Be Stunned* as “the most successful and disturbing” work of the National Pavilions that year.²⁶

It may have seemed strange for an Israeli artist to exhibit at the Polish Pavilion, but her family history lends this choice greater credence, especially in the context of the film series. Bartana’s grandparents perished there during the Holocaust, so her Polish heritage would qualify her as one of the 3.3 million Polish

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Ibid, 17.

21

Eliezer Don-Yehiya and Charles S. Liebman, “The Symbol System of Zionist-Socialism: An Aspect of Israeli Civil Religion”, *Modern Judaism* 1, no. 2 (1981): 121-48, www.jstor.org/stable/1396057, accessed April 2020.

22

“And Europe Will Be Stunned/Zamach (Assassination), 2011”, *Yael Bartana*, <http://yaelbartana.com/project/trembling-time-2001-2#info>, accessed February 2020.

23

J. Hoberman, “Jewish Pioneers Return to Poland”, *Tablet*, October 25, 2018, <https://www.tabletmag.com/jewish-arts-and-culture/273209/jewish-pioneers-return-to-poland>, accessed May 2022.

24

Yael Bartana, “Interview Yael Bartana”, interview by Nina Folkersma, *Nina Folkersma*, May 7, 2011, <http://www.ninafolkersma.nl/?p=1299>, accessed May 2022.

25

“...and Europe will be stunned”, *Polish Pavilion in Venice*, <https://labiennale.art.pl/en/wystawy/yael-bartana-and-europe-will-be-stunned/>, accessed May 2022.

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Jason Edward Kaufman, “Venice Biennale an Ambitious but Typically Overblown International Art Festival”, *Washington Post*, June 17, 2011, https://www.washingtonpost.com/entertainment/museums/venice-biennale-an-ambitious-but-typically-overblown-international-art-festival/2011/06/14/AGQA75YH_story.html, accessed May 2022; Jens Hoffman, Dieter Roelstraete, and Kaelen Wilson-Goldie, “54th Venice Biennale”, *Frieze*, September 1, 2011, <https://frieze.com/article/54th-venice-biennale>, accessed May 2022.

Jews slated to return by the wishes of the JRMiP.²⁷ In this respect, her status as an artist-representative of Poland takes a small step toward fulfilling the goals of the JRMiP.

The films were made in close collaboration with Sławomir Sierakowski, founder and chief editor of *Krytyka Polityczna*. Cast as the fictional founder of the JRMiP, Sierakowski is an influential figure in contemporary Polish culture and politics in real life. Bartana's collaboration with Sierakowski – who not only acted but co-wrote the speech for the first film – furthers the idea of the JRMiP as “invert[ing] Zionist principles”, as Benjamin Seroussi and Eyal Danon define it.²⁸ Although Sierakowski himself is not Jewish, his status as a journalist and leading intellectual provides credibility for his character which mirrors that of Zionism founder Theodor Herzl. Bartana describes Herzl as follows: “author of imaginary utopias, journalist, politician and jurist...[he] was the embodiment of the New Jew, whose political vision created the Zionist movement ex nihilo, thereby giving birth to the future state of Israel”.²⁹

Not coincidentally, Sierakowski also creates an “imaginary utopia” in the films. Uilleam Blacker defines Sierakowski's fictitious call for the “Jewish return to Poland” as a “utopian project”, even comparing it to Michel Foucault's heterotopia, “an effectively enacted utopia in which [...] all the other real sites that can be found within the culture are simultaneously represented, contested and inverted”.³⁰ Between Sierakowski's and Herzl's similar beginnings and ultimate goals, Bartana clearly positions her movement's founder as a new Herzl for a revitalised Jewish nationalism. But contextualised within this utopian mythology, the darker undertones of Bartana's films are revealed. One recalls the utopian aspirations embedded in the Israeli collective memory – from the socialist *kibbutzim* Bartana features in *Mur i wieża* [fig. 3], to the utopian elements of the Bauhaus in Israeli architecture, as elaborated upon in the following section. Bartana forewarns the viewer of potentially dire consequences and a hostile or even violent future for the JRMiP in Poland, just as the Israeli-Palestinian conflict persists today, with no resolution in sight.³¹

Viewers may therefore question the sincerity of Bartana's suggestions

fig. 3

Yael Bartana. *Mur i wieża* (*Wall and Tower*), 2009. Video still of one channel video and sounds installation, 15". Image courtesy of Annet Gelink Gallery, Amsterdam, and Sommer Contemporary Art, Tel Aviv.



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Bartana, “Interview Yael Bartana”, interview.

28

Bartana, “A Conversation between Yael Bartana, Galit Eilat and Charles Esche”, 116; Eyal Danon and Benjamin Seroussi, *Inferno* (New York: Petzel Gallery, 2015), 47.

29

Yael Bartana in Nicole Schweizer (ed.), *Yael Bartana*, (Zurich: JRP-Ringier, 2017), 36.

30

Uilleam Blacker, “Spatial Dialogues and Holocaust Memory in Contemporary Polish Art: Yael Bartana, Rafał Betlejewski and Joanna Rajkowska”, *The Open Arts Journal*, no. 3 (2014): 183-5, <https://openartsjournal.org/issue-3/2014s32ub/>, accessed May 2022.

in *And Europe Will Be Stunned*, as the films' documentary-like appearance makes the meaning and reality of the work especially imprecise. Avi Feldman describes a "blurred distinction between 'real' and 'fictional'" in Bartana's trilogy, permitting her "to position the movement on the border between being a political engagement and being a fictional artistic project".³² Bartana's work can therefore be understood as what Carrie Lambert-Beatty calls "parafiction":

[Parafiction] has one foot in the field of the real. Unlike historical fiction's fact-based but imagined worlds, in parafiction real and/or imaginary personages and stories intersect with the world as it is being lived. Post-simulacral, parafictional strategies are oriented less toward the disappearance of the real than toward the pragmatics of trust. Simply put, with various degrees of success, for various durations, and for various purposes, these fictions are experienced as fact.³³

The fictional movement to grant Jews Polish citizenship is grounded in reality; legislation is in place in Portugal and Spain to grant citizenship to those who can trace their roots to the Inquisition, and Germany is restoring citizenship for Jews who were stripped of it during World War II and their descendants.³⁴ With this similitude to real-life politics and Bartana's ability as a convincing filmmaker-artist, the plausibility of the JRMiP makes the viewing experience all the more effective [fig. 4].

fig. 4
Yael Bartana. *Zamach*
(Assassination), 2011. Video
still of one channel video
and sounds installation, 35".
Image courtesy of Annet
Gelink Gallery, Amsterdam, and
Sommer Contemporary Art, Tel
Aviv.



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For further reading on utopia in Israeli culture and history, see Marc J. Rothenstein, *Contested Utopia: Jewish Dreams and Israeli Realities* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society, 2021).

32

Avi Feldman, "Performing Justice – From Dada's Trial to Yael Bartana's JRMiP Congress", *OnCurating* 26 (October 2015), <https://www.on-curating.org/issue-26-reader/the-curator-and-her-double-the-cruelty-of-the-avatar-copy-183.html#.XfL-WZNXh-V>, accessed May 2022.

33

Carrie Lambert-Beatty, "Make-Believe: Parafiction and Plausibility", *OCTOBER* 129 (Summer 2009): 54.

34

Ofer Aderet, "Ashkenazi Jews Find Spanish, Portuguese Roots after Passport Offer to Descendants of Expelled", *Haaretz*, October 25, 2019, <https://www.haaretz.com/world-news/europe/premium-ashkenazi-jews-find-spanish-portuguese-roots-after-passport-offer-to-descendants-1.8024821>, accessed May 2022; "Restoration of German Citizenship (Article 116 II Basic Law)", German Missions in the United Kingdom, <https://uk.diplo.de/uk-en/02/citizenship/restoration-of-citizenship>, accessed April 2020.

There are a plethora of examples indicating Bartana's prowess as a "parafictioneer" through this work. Feldman, for example, lists numerous reviews of *And Europe Will Be Stunned* as evidence of "the consistent debate" about whether this work is "real or unreal".³⁵ Beyond critics and journalists, viewers too have been confused or even fooled by the murky reality of the work. Bartana describes receiving "the best comment" about the film trilogy when an older Israeli man exclaimed, "That was the best documentary I've ever seen!" upon leaving the pavilion.³⁶

Another interesting, albeit unsettlingly anti-Semitic, example came in the form of a news article about the 2012 JRMiP conference by the Nordic Resistance Movement, a neo-Nazi organisation. The article, entitled "Jews Plan to Make Poland a Zionist Homeland", states, "the conference...was supposedly about Jewish art and population development in Poland...in reality it was a Zionist conference...which was about how the Jews are intent on grabbing control of Poland and turning it into a new Jewish state".³⁷

These examples, one entertainingly anecdotal and another disturbingly dangerous, express the complexities and consequences of politically engaged art that straddles this blurred border between fiction and reality. But, as Bartana puts it, "that's the mark of success for a fictional story. It has to do with the work's proximity to reality", citing the very real and very racist reactions of Polish commenters on the YouTube video of *Mary Koszmary*.³⁸ The documentarian narrative therefore has a pungent effect, rendering the casual viewer unsettled and unsure of the films' veracity.³⁹

Joshua Simon explains that "by changing means and by confusing symbols, by using images and by activating representational devices and systems, in Israel, Poland and Palestine, these films perform a political act".⁴⁰ As the far-right continues its ascent in Europe and Israel, and the distinctions between fact and fiction in politics become increasingly and startlingly vague, *And Europe Will Be Stunned* feels especially relevant. Bartana effectively wields her political knowledge and artistic expertise to create films that not only engage viewers with a convincing narrative, but prompt them to reconsider Jewish national identity and its relation to both Eastern Europe and Israel.

The Israeli Pavilion: Sigalit Landau

Across the Giardini, Sigalit Landau's installation in the Israeli Pavilion considers the relationship between Israel and Jordan, two countries also bound together by 20th century conflict, but looks to a more collaborative future across national borders. As the Israeli Pavilion curators Jean de Loisy and Ilan Wizgan state in the accompanying exhibition catalogue, "Landau's insistence on working with contradictory forces, forcing them to somehow correlate and interrelate, should be understood as a political stance".⁴¹ In *One's Man Floor is Another Man's Feelings*, playing on the title of the 1973 Paul Simon song "One Man's Ceiling is Another

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Feldman, "Performing Justice".

36

Yael Bartana, "Embrace Weakness! A Conversation", in Schweizer (ed.), *Yael Bartana*, 139.

37

Erik Forsell, "Jews Plan to Make Poland a Zionist Homeland", *Nordic Resistance Movement*, June 8, 2019, <https://nordicresistancemovement.org/jews-plan-to-make-poland-a-zionist-homeland/#>, accessed May 2022.

38

Bartana, "Embrace Weakness! A Conversation", 139.

39

Nicole Schweizer, "Foreword: Fictionalizing the Real", in Schweizer (ed.), *Yael Bartana*, 5.

40

Joshua Simon, "Spaces of Appearance", in Ljungberg and Nilsson (eds.), *Yael Bartana - And Europe Will Be Stunned*, 146.

41

Sigalit Landau, Jean de Loisy, and Ilan Wizgan, *Sigalit Landau: One Man's Floor Is Another Man's Feelings* (Paris: Kamel Mennour, 2011), 106.

Man's Floor", Landau reimagines the Dead Sea, the impenetrable natural border between the two opposing nations, as a nexus for creativity and movement.⁴² She aims for a bridge inspired by the saline body of water from which it would emerge.

One Man's Floor is Another Man's Feelings is a truly multifaceted work, incorporating the entire Israeli Pavilion: three floors and a courtyard. The building itself is emblematic of Israeli nationalism; Chelsea Haines has described the Israeli Pavilion development, which launched in 1949, the year after the State of Israel declared independence, and opened at the 1952 biennale, as a "microcosm of the Israeli national project" – the nascent nation-state aimed to establish itself as a modernised, Western ally in the Middle East.⁴³ Its design, conceived by Corbusian architect Ze'ev Rechter, emulates the International style that has come to be associated with Israeli architecture due to its prevalence in Tel Aviv's White City.⁴⁴ Landau's installation was heavily integrated with the architectural integrity of the building itself, in contrast with Bartana's utilisation of the Polish Pavilion building as a vessel for her films. According to Wizgan, Landau engaged with the building's structure in her creative process, "including the tearing down of walls, the sealing of windows, the digging of holes, excavations and the like".⁴⁵ Landau's interest in connecting her work with its environment is consistent with her interest in land and place. As she puts it, she is "acting in the land, rather than 'about it' in the studio – it means going on site. Like an archaeologist, treating the land of a different stratum".⁴⁶ She said, "the story and questions the pavilion posed were a series of interactions with water, land, place, coexistence and polyphonic shades of gray with questions and illumination of the future".⁴⁷

By the time of the Biennale, Landau had already been working with the concept, location, and salt of the Dead Sea for seven years.⁴⁸ She describes the Dead Sea as a "ritualistic motif" in her art.⁴⁹ These "rituals" have involved traveling to the Dead Sea with a variety of found objects throughout August, the hottest time of year, during early morning hours. This is when, according to Landau, "the Dead Sea is impossible to visit and totally unbearable to enter, this is when the lake gives its best crystals".⁵⁰ Through a process of prolonged suspension in the Dead Sea's thirty-three percent salinity, various found objects develop a thickly crystallised layer of salt.⁵¹ For *One's Man Floor is Another Man's Feelings*, her signature crystallisation method is used for a pair of shoes, whose journey after removal from the Dead Sea make up an important aspect of the exhibition.

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Sigalit Landau, email to author, March 4, 2020.

43

Chelsea Haines, "Universal Civilization and National Cultures: Producing Israel at the Venice Biennale, 1948–1952", 20, 33 in *Exhibitions Beyond Boundaries: Transnational Exchanges through Art, Architecture, and Design from 1945*, ed. Harriet Atkinson, Verity Clarkson, and Sarah Lichtman (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2022).

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For further reading on Bauhaus architecture in Tel Aviv, see Nitza Metzger-Szmuk, *Dwelling on the Dunes: Tel Aviv, Modern Movement and Bauhaus Ideals / Des maisons sur le sable: Tel-Aviv, Mouvement moderne et esprit Bauhaus* (Paris: Editions de l'Eclat, 2004).

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Ilan Wizgan, "The Freezing and Melting Point", in Landau, de Loisy, and Wizgan, *Sigalit Landau: One Man's Floor Is Another Man's Feelings*, 154.

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Landau, "Exploring Inherited Identities", interview.

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Landau, email to author.

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Landau, *Sigalit Landau – Salt Years*, n.p.

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Ibid.

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Landau, de Loisy, and Wizgan, *Sigalit Landau: One Man's Floor Is Another Man's Feelings*, 99.

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Joshua Hammer, "The Dying of the Dead Sea", *Smithsonian Magazine*, October 1, 2005, <https://www.smithsonianmag.com/science-nature/the-dying-of-the-dead-sea-70079351/>, accessed May 2022.

fig. 5
Sigalit Landau. *King of the Shepherd and the Concealed Part* (detail), 2011. Installation view of metal pipes, water, 11.2x2.2x8.6 m. *One Man's Floor is Another Man's Feelings*, Israeli Pavilion, 54th Biennale, Venice, Italy. Image courtesy of Sigalit Landau.



The *One Man's Floor is Another Man's Feelings* experience begins on the ground floor in what Landau calls the “machine room”.⁵² The visitor is immediately confronted by large pipes which fill the space [fig. 5]. Water flows through the pipes, out of and into the canal, propelled by a concealed pump. The white and blue pipes, incidentally the colours of the Israeli flag, are ready-mades; the same pipes used by the Israeli National Water Company, Mekorot.⁵³ Landau therefore ensures the specificity of location beyond the assumption presented by its existence within the Israeli Pavilion. Although conceptual, her work remains grounded in a reality of place.

Past the pipes is a video projected onto the floor. The work is entitled *Azkelon* (2011), a hybrid of Gaza and Ashkelon. This sixteen-minute video shows three men playing the game “Countries” or “Knife” on the beach (specifically the stretch of sand between the Gaza Strip and the Israeli city of Ashkelon), in which knives are used to delineate borders and mark out territory. According to Landau, “the work examines the notion and process of marking and erasing, establishing and demolishing, be it by a natural force such as waves...or by human will”.⁵⁴ This concept of territorial negotiation and creation is followed later in the exhibition.

Visitors then go up a spiral stairwell to the upper floor (the middle floor is the final location in the *promenade architecturale* of the building), in which the *horror vacui* element of the first floor is juxtaposed by a room empty but for a solitary film projected on a vast, diagonal wall. This video, *Salted Lake* (2011), depicts a pair of salt-crystallised shoes slowly melting into the ground. Like her other salt objects, these shoes were subjected to the crystallisation of the Dead Sea until they were completely enveloped by thickly layered salt. Next, they were flown from the hot, Israeli body of water to a frozen one in the northern Polish city of Gdańsk. As one watches the video, the viewer bears witness to another of Landau's scientifically informed techniques; the salt melts the ice until the shoes are swallowed by the water [fig. 6].

⁵²

BiennaleChannel, “Art Biennale 2011 – Israel”, YouTube video, 00:13, June 1, 2011, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NBFDedy1gH0>, accessed May 2022.

⁵³

Wizgan, “The Freezing and Melting Point”, 155; BiennaleChannel, “Art Biennale 2011 – Israel”, 00:30; Landau, email to author.

⁵⁴

Landau, de Loisy, and Wizgan, *Sigalit Landau: One Man's Floor Is Another Man's Feelings*, 42.

fig. 6
Sigalit Landau. *Salted Lake*, 2011. Installation view of still video with sound, 11'04". *One Man's Floor is Another Man's Feelings*, Israeli Pavilion, 54th Biennale, Venice, Italy. Image courtesy of Sigalit Landau.



Landau's choice of location was not incidental. Like Bartana, she is looking back to recent Jewish history. Gdańsk, formerly known by its German name of Danzig, had been semi-autonomous with ties to Poland after the Treaty of Versailles, until Hitler annexed it in 1939 and soon afterward established the nearby Stutthof concentration camp.⁵⁵ Like Bartana, the Holocaust is not simply a part of history but of personal relevance – Landau's father and grandparents were Holocaust survivors.⁵⁶ The choice of shoes as the chosen object for the film likely also has ties to the Holocaust. According to Jeffrey Feldman, shoes "have been central to almost every attempt to use objects to relay the visceral brutality of Holocaust history by turning the memory of the concentration camps into things" – take, for example, the piles of shoes which are a hallmark of Holocaust museums and commemorative sites.⁵⁷ These shoes, as Wizgan asserts, are therefore "the most prominent motif in the exhibition".⁵⁸

It is difficult, perhaps impossible, to separate the collective memory and trauma of the Holocaust from Israeli life, and therefore from Israeli art. "[Holocaust] questions are particularly resonant in Israel, where Holocaust history and memory are the cornerstones of national culture", says Olga Gershenson.⁵⁹ Furthermore, Yigal Zalmona maintains that "the post-Holocaust trauma...is deeply embedded in Israel's collective psyche and affects even the political sphere".⁶⁰ We see this resonance in *And Europe will be Stunned*, just as we do in *One Man's Floor is Another Man's Feelings*. In this respect, both works' incorporation of Holocaust-related themes and symbols supports the assertion that Israeli national identity is directly linked to this past collective trauma.

The visual imagery of the melting lake and salt-covered shoes acts as an aesthetic/thematic transition between the "machine room" ground floor and the

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"Danzig", United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, <https://encyclopedia.ushmm.org/content/en/article/danzig>, accessed February 2020.

⁵⁶

Landau, email to author.

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Jeffrey Feldman, "The Holocaust Shoe: Untying Memory: Shoes as Holocaust Memorial Experience", in Edna Nahshon (ed.), *Jews and Shoes*, (New York: Berg, 2008), 119–30.

⁵⁸

Wizgan, "The Freezing and Melting Point", 159.

⁵⁹

Gershenson, "Meta-Memory: About the Holocaust in New Israeli Video Art", 67.

⁶⁰

Yigal Zalmona, *A Century of Israeli Art* (Farnham: Lund Humphries, 2013), 466.

middle floor, the centrepiece of the exhibition. Next, on the middle floor, the viewer encounters a round conference table. Twelve laptops are on the table, each showing the same video, *Laces* (2011), in which twelve people speaking Hebrew, Arabic, and English (the number twelve may bring to mind the twelve tribes of Israel) are debating the proposed construction of a salt bridge in the Dead Sea.⁶¹ The debaters include the Israeli cultural attaché to Jordan, a representative of the Israeli Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the Head of Israel Chemicals, two engineers, the Head of a Jordanian salt company, the secretary of an Israeli fertiliser company, a Jordanian ecologist, an Israeli designer, the spokesman of Israeli Dead Sea Works, an Israeli landscape architect, and the artist herself.⁶² Like in the film on the ground floor, *Laces* reintroduces the themes of international debate and negotiation, through which conflict ridden borders and border crossings are constantly redetermining what and where Israel is, and in turn, what it means to be an Israeli. The video also invokes shoe imagery – we view the debate from below the table, where a young girl is mischievously tying their shoelaces together, representing the ‘under the table’ aspect of such negotiations.⁶³

Once the debate is over, it seems that the participants will fall down, tripping onto each other due to their connected shoelaces. But as the film concludes, the unexpected occurs. These high-profile industry executives, engineers, scientists, diplomats, and artists all remove their shoes to leave. A circle of tied-together oxfords and loafers remains. The young girl’s attempt at connecting the debaters and bringing forth their commonalities despite their differences unfortunately fails. They part ways, with the salt bridge ultimately unsuccessful and unrealised. In the transcript of the debate, Landau has the closing line, asking, “is there anything we can do together to bridge the Dead Sea?”⁶⁴ The video and audio begin again, continuously looping as its ending seamlessly returns to the first questions on the feasibility of the project. Nothing is resolved, and this project, which Chantal Pontbriand accurately calls “complex from a technical standpoint...even more so on geostrategic and political levels”, remains unrealised.⁶⁵ The proposed action to break the barriers of seemingly antithetical national identities – a Jewish democracy and an Arab monarchy, let alone the Palestinian territories – has barely commenced, despite an end goal of October 2014 or the awareness and seed money that Landau has raised.

Landau has spent much of her career imagining, designing, and advocating for the salt bridge proposal debated here. As previously described on her website, “for some years, Sigalit Landau has pursued her vision of building a bridge, pier, or float that would function as a meeting point in the Dead Sea’s waters, offering the people of all national entities in the area of Israel, Jordan, and the Palestinian Authority a new way of experiencing and sharing the Dead Sea”.⁶⁶ It is defined as a public art project, and yet would also work to create infrastructure – a new source for transnational movement and communication. The geography becomes essential, using art “to unravel how geography as an epistemic structure and its signifying practices shape and structure not just national and economic relations but also identity constitution and identity fragmentation”, in the words of Irit Rogoff.⁶⁷ This project therefore reflects an antithesis to the border drawing depicted in *Azkelon*; instead of creating boundaries between “imagined communities”, she hopes to connect or permeate them.

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Wizgan, “The Freezing and Melting Point”, 158.

62

Landau, de Loisy, and Wizgan, *Sigalit Landau: One Man’s Floor Is Another Man’s Feelings*, 137.

63

Chantal Pontbriand, “Building a Different World: An Aesthetics of Fluidity”, in Landau, de Loisy, and Wizgan, *Sigalit Landau: One Man’s Floor Is Another Man’s Feelings*, 164.

64

Wizgan, “The Freezing and Melting Point”, 142.

65

Pontbriand, “Building a Different World: An Aesthetics of Fluidity”, 164.

66

“Salt Bridge”, sigalitlandau, <https://www.sigalitlandau.com/salt-bridge>, accessed February 2020.

67

Irit Rogoff, *Terra Infirma: Geography’s Visual Culture* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2000), 10.

As opposed to the “parafictional” proposal of Bartana, Landau’s salt bridge is not abstract. In fact, the debate transmitted in the video is based on real meetings in Israel and Jordan held the year before.⁶⁸ An image of former Israeli President Shimon Peres with the artist on the project’s (since deactivated) website alludes to the political intent behind the idea, as does the tagline “Growing the political in the aesthetics, the aesthetics in the ethics, and the ethics in the political (for almost two decades)”.⁶⁹ In fact, Peres gave a speech at the opening of the 2011 Israeli Pavilion, seemingly the only time he visited the Biennale despite the three others that occurred during his term as president.⁷⁰

Finally, audiences end their visit in a courtyard, where a circle of the twelve pairs of shoes, cast in bronze, sits. This piece, entitled *O My Friends, There Are No Friends* (2011) after an Aristotle quote, acts as a monument both to the potential of collaboration beyond differences and the failure of the salt bridge debates to do so.⁷¹ This sculpture is reminiscent of commemorative memorials, especially those of the Holocaust, due once again to the repeated motif of empty shoes [fig. 7]. Tied together, the shoes of their former wearers are inseparable, recalling what Wizgan describes as the “recurring concept of the exhibition...the interdependence of human beings and nations”.⁷²

In a fitting summary of the exhibition, Wizgan states,

Without being overtly political, the exhibition (also) deals with the political in life and in art, and is inherently critical of nationalism and national ego, which always undermine rationalism and the positive potential inherent in cooperation and in a just distribution of resources and wealth.⁷³

fig. 7
Sigalit Landau. ‘O my friends, there are no friends’, 2011. Installation view of twelve pairs of bronze shoes, 300 cm diameter. *One Man’s Floor is Another Man’s Feelings*, Israeli Pavilion, 54th Biennale, Venice, Italy. Image courtesy of Sigalit Landau.



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Landau, de Loisy, and Wizgan, *Sigalit Landau: One Man’s Floor Is Another Man’s Feelings*, 137.

⁶⁹

“Home”, Salt Bridge, Salt Route Foundation, <https://www.saltroute.org/>, accessed February 2020.

⁷⁰

Lior Dotan, “President Shimon Peres speech at the Opening – Venice Biennale 2011”, YouTube video, June 16, 2011, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Co8iNJw96Q8>, accessed May 2022.

⁷¹

Pontbriand, “Building a Different World: An Aesthetics of Fluidity”, 164.

⁷²

Wizgan, “The Freezing and Melting Point”, 159.

⁷³

Ibid.

One could use a similar quote to describe Bartana's piece, although she is certainly more overtly critical of nationalism. Ultimately, both artists, although raised within an intensely nationalist environment, are uninterested in uplifting the "national ego" inherent to the organisation of the Biennale. Rather, they use diverse political tactics, from revolutionary grassroots movements to multinational diplomatic talks, as an artistic technique to question such nationalist tendencies that ultimately serve only to divide communities rather than bring them together.

ILLUMInations: Nationalism and the Venice Biennale

Although the biennial model is centred around metropolitan ideals – with Venice and its successors defined by their urban locales rather than countries – the participating nations themselves and their accompanying artists are not granted this luxury.⁷⁴ They are defined by nationality within what Caroline Jones has called the "toyland world-picturing" within "the biennial's cosmopolitan urbanism".⁷⁵ In this cosmopolitan exhibitionary tradition, "the artist must both represent her tribe and become transcendently *international*".⁷⁶ As Jones further explains, "the artist who would become international would need to speak a global language, but would just as often be understood to speak of her own representative difference".⁷⁷

One can argue that both Bartana and Landau are forced to fit into such contradictory categories, and their divergent efforts to do so are exemplified by their coinciding Biennale entries. Bartana may best exemplify Jones's first description of the biennial artist. She quite literally "represent[s] her tribe" in creating a set of work that focuses on Jewish themes, as many modern Jews refer to themselves by the Biblical identification of "tribe".⁷⁸ Bartana does consider herself Jewish, according to a 2015 interview with Israeli newspaper *Haaretz*, despite her secularity and murky national identity.⁷⁹ Although she clearly recognises and maintains a connection with her Israeli roots (she has stated that despite raising her son in Germany, she "make[s] sure he knows Israel's his home"), she has certainly achieved such transcendent internationalism with associations in Germany, the Netherlands (currently her two homes; she has even been described in several reviews of *And Europe Will Be Stunned* as "Dutch-Israeli" or "Israeli-Dutch"), and now Poland.⁸⁰ Perhaps she is branching into what can be termed *anationalism*, beyond a single or multi-national identity. Bartana would likely agree with fellow multinational artist Yinka Shonibare, who said in 2003, "I feel strongly that the time has come to resist the temptation of defining artists by the narrow confines of nation" and instead "prioritise the aesthetic and political concerns of artists rather than their origins".⁸¹

74

Jones, *The Global Work of Art*, 93.

75

Ibid, 95.

76

Ibid, 96.

77

Ibid.

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Rabbi Susan Leider, "Torah: Are Jews Today Members of a Tribe", *Bay Area Jewish News*, June 9, 2016, <https://www.jweekly.com/2016/06/09/torah-are-jews-today-members-of-a-tribe/>, accessed May 2022.

79

Marisa Fox-Bevilacqua, "Artist Yael Bartana Taps into Jewish-Diaspora Zeitgeist", *Haaretz*, February 9, 2015, <https://www.haaretz.com/israel-news/culture/premium-artist-yael-bartana-taps-into-diaspora-zeitgeist-1.530184>, accessed May 2022.

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Fox-Bevilacqua, "Artist Yael Bartana Taps into Jewish-Diaspora Zeitgeist;" Laura Cumming, "Yael Bartana: And Europe Will Be Stunned; Elizabeth Price: Here – Review", *The Guardian*, May 12, 2012, <https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2012/may/13/art-exhibition>, accessed May 2022; John Arthur Peetz, "Yael Bartana Talks about the Completion of Her Polish Trilogy", *Artforum*, July 9, 2011, <https://www.artforum.com/interviews/yael-bartana-talks-about-the-completion-of-her-polish-trilogy-28418>, accessed May 2022.

81

Francesco Bonami, Catherine David, Okwui Enwezor, Tim Griffin, James Meyer, Hans Ulrich Obrist, Martha Rosler, and Yinka Shonibare, "Global Tendencies: Globalism and the Large-Scale Exhibition", *Artforum* (November 2011): 154.

A rather telling example of this is Bartana's response to a series of five questions regarding the theme of nationhood that Curiger posed to all Biennale artists. Her response to the question, "where do you feel at home?", was "I feel at home where I feel generosity and trust", thereby totally removing any connections to a specific place, let alone nation.⁸² When asked, "how many nations are inside you?", she responded with a simple "there are no nations inside me".⁸³ These answers support the interpretation that Bartana is far removed from identifying herself with any specific nation, and is instead an international artist in every sense of the term. This is in stark contrast to Landau, whose entire practice and identity seems to be indebted to a specificity of place. Landau's response to "where do you feel at home", for example, incorporated her Israeliness and emphasised the importance of it in her life, replying "In airports, in Israeli towns, on the beach of the Med, Red, or Dead seas, in the desert, inside water, in my house and bed".⁸⁴

Landau indeed uses Jones's prescription of "a global language...to speak of her own representative difference".⁸⁵ She is differentiated by her Israeli nationality, both in the context of the Biennale and in the international art world more generally. In her words: "I represented myself in Venice...I am Israeli, I feel Israeli, I am Jewish and also international in my language in art".⁸⁶ In order to express and reckon with her Israeli identity, she uses the universal language of conceptualism, ever popular in the globalised contemporary art world. The ideas presented of water, salt, and earth take centre stage in her conceptual installation at the Biennale and in much of her practice, and narrative elements, while still present, are used to far less of a degree than in the work of Bartana, for example.

Landau's guiding concept for her practice can be found in one iteration of an oft-used phrase for describing her work: "Refusing to accept pre-given assumptions of difference, she aims to connect the past to the future; the west to the east; the private to the collective; the sub-existential to the Uber-profound".⁸⁷ In this respect, Landau makes explicit her rejection of differences between various communities; rather she sees the connections as more telling. She states explicitly, "my work is about building bridges", referring not only to the salt bridge but also to metaphorical bridges between peoples.⁸⁸ In *One Man's Floor Is Another Man's Feelings*, she critiques nationalism by highlighting commonalities, bringing together Israelis and Jordanians over a common geographical landmark to encourage communication and connection. This is a completely different strategy from the one Bartana adopts for her critique of nationalism in *And Europe Will Be Stunned*; she brings to light the tensions and dangers of only thinking in terms of differences, like the notion that Jews are inherently different from Poles.

Both artists are concerned with ideas of movement and migration between nations, delving into the realm of transnationalism. Stefan Krätke, Kathrin Wildner, and Stephan Lanz identify transnationalism as a term which

generally questions a conception of space that uses nation-states as its primary reference point. Borders, political regulations, and constructions of national identities still maintain central importance, even if they are challenged by transnational communication and social practices. With

82

Curiger, *ILLUMInations: La Biennale Di Venezia 54. Esposizione Internazionale D'Arte*, 418.

83

Ibid.

84

Ibid, 382.

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Jones, *The Global Work of Art*, 96.

86

Landau, email to author.

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Landau, de Loisy, and Wizgan, *Sigalit Landau: One Man's Floor Is Another Man's Feelings*, 106.

88

Sigalit Landau, "Biography", in Landau, de Loisy, and Wizgan, *Sigalit Landau: One Man's Floor Is Another Man's Feelings*, 174.

“transnationalism” we refer to border-crossing processes, which are constituted through national conditions, while questioning them at the same time.⁸⁹

In this respect, the transnational ideas of the works assert themselves as an alternative to nationalism, a way to go beyond the nationalist confines of an international society fragmented into nation-states.

Some may argue that the Venice Biennale already exists as a transnational entity, where curators and artists of diverse nationalities regularly contribute to a single nation’s pavilion.⁹⁰ In fact, former *Artforum* editor-in-chief Tim Griffin defined biennials and other large-scale exhibitions as “endowed with a transnational circuitry”.⁹¹ On the other hand, Francesco Bonami, Artistic Director of the 50th Venice Biennale in 2003, seemed to hold a similar viewpoint to Curiger, recognising the potential of the Biennale as a platform for conversation regarding differences. He stated, “we experience fragmentation in the world, and that’s what these big scale events should reflect, with all the contradictions and tensions this implies”.⁹² In her essay in the *ILLUMInations* catalogue, Curiger echoed Bonami’s diction, saying that the exhibition will “explore notions of the collective, yet also speak of fragmentary identity”.⁹³

In the catalogue, Giovanni Carmine, the artistic organiser of *ILLUMInations*, addressed how the current events of the day reflected the “idea or better the ideal of nation” with which the Biennale was also concerned.⁹⁴ He pointed out how preparations for the event in 2011 were concurrent with the highly impactful Arab Spring.⁹⁵ With Curiger appointed a year before, her decision to focus on nationalist questions for her artistic direction was timely, if coincidental. The Arab Spring also included the start of the civil war in Syria, sparking massive migration from Syria to Europe and elsewhere. Although certainly not predicting this critical refugee crisis, both Bartana’s and Landau’s considerations of migration make their work ever more relevant, as Israel’s Arab neighbors found themselves steeped in revolution.

Bartana and Landau were not the only artists dealing with nationalism. It seems that Curiger’s theme of choice inspired, or perhaps struck a nerve with, many of the other artists and curators involved. In a *Los Angeles Times* review of the exhibition, Jori Finkel enumerated a wide variety of National Pavilions resisting traditional methods of national representation or the idea of it in general, stating, “the very concept of the national pavilions has come under attack. Contemporary artists and curators on the whole do not like to color within the lines, especially when those lines are national borders”.⁹⁶ She identifies the United States, India, Australia, Latin America, Central Asia, Sweden, and Poland as a sampling of

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Stefan Krätke, Kathrin Wildner, and Stephan Lanz, “The Transnationality of Cities: Concepts, Dimensions, and Research Fields. An Introduction”, in Stefan Krätke, Kathrin Wildner, and Stephan Lanz (eds.), *Transnationalism and Urbanism*, (New York: Routledge, 2012), 1.

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For an overview of these instances, see Angela Vettese, “The National Pavilions of the Venice Biennale: Spaces for Cultural Diplomacy”, *Monos Editions*, no. 6 (2014): 46-7.

91

Bonami, David, Enwezor, Griffin, Meyer, Obrist, Rosler, and Shonibare, “Global Tendencies: Globalism and the Large-Scale Exhibition”, 153.

92

Ibid., 155.

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Curiger, *ILLUMInations: La Biennale Di Venezia 54. Esposizione Internazionale D’Arte*, 44.

94

Giovanni Carmine, “Where is Ai Wei Wei?”, in Curiger, *ILLUMInations: La Biennale Di Venezia 54. Esposizione Internazionale D’Arte*, 60.

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Ibid.

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Jori Finkel, “At the Venice Biennale, National Artists Know No Boundaries”, *Los Angeles Times*, June 6, 2011, <https://www.latimes.com/entertainment/la-xpm-2011-jun-06-la-et-venice-wrapup-20110606-story.html>, accessed May 2022.

the pavilions present in 2011 that critiqued national identity.⁹⁷ According to Indian Pavilion curator Ranjit Hoskote, the curators and artists of these and other pavilions thought “beyond national borders” with a “transnational imagination”.⁹⁸

This trend seems to confirm the assertion by Anthony Gardner and Charles Green that biennials such as Venice’s may “be leading the reconsideration and reconstruction of art’s histories towards properly global narratives”.⁹⁹ In fact, four years after Curiger’s Biennale, in 2015, Nigerian curator Okwui Enzewor took a decidedly more globalising view with the 56th Venice Biennale (where Hoskote was on the jury).¹⁰⁰ Entitled *All the World’s Futures*, Enzewor emphasised its exploration of the “global reality”, “global landscape”, and “global environment”, therefore opening the potential for the Venice Biennale to continue exploring such relevant narratives and artists’ increasingly transnational identities in the coming years.¹⁰¹

In fact, transnationalism will take centre stage at the Venice Biennale in 2024, led by Brazilian curator Adriano Pedrosa. Under the theme *Stranieri Ovunque / Foreigners Everywhere*, the Biennale will shine a light on those who have crossed borders, nations, or identities – “artists who are themselves foreigners, immigrants, expatriates, diasporic, émigrés, exiled, and refugees”.¹⁰² It will be enlightening to see how the Italian Pavilion, which hosted Israel’s first foray into exhibiting at the Biennale in 1948, will take to a theme which promises to turn the Biennale’s increasingly arbitrary national divisions on its head.¹⁰³

For individual nations, however, varied identities within and beyond borders call for unique approaches. According to Yigal Zalmona, given the “complexity of Israel’s conflicted reality...the concept of identity must be framed as a question rather than an answer”.¹⁰⁴ At the Polish and Israeli Pavilions, respectively, both Yael Bartana and Sigalit Landau used their place as international artists to explore questions of Israeli national identity. In doing so, they contributed to a larger conversation on nationalism that traversed this iteration of the Venice Biennale as well as the wider world in 2011. Now, more than a decade later, these questions continue to be posed as Israel grapples with its national ideals, while the possibilities of transnationalism challenge us to reimagine our communities and identities, today and in the future.

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Ibid.

98

Ibid.

99

Anthony Gardner and Charles Green, *Biennials, Triennials, and Documenta : The Exhibitions That Created Contemporary Art* (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2016), 92.

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“56th Venice Biennale 2015”, *Universes in Universe*, <https://universes.art/en/venice-biennale/2015>, accessed April 2020.

101

Ibid.

102

“Biennale Arte 2024: Stranieri Ovunque – Foreigners Everywhere”, *La Biennale di Venezia*, June 22, 2023, <https://www.labiennale.org/en/news/biennale-arte-2024-stranieri-ovunque-foreignerseverywhere>, accessed September 2023.

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Chelsea Haines, “Universal Civilization and National Cultures: Producing Israel at the Venice Biennale, 1948–1952”, 20

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Zalmona, *A Century of Israeli Art*, 490-1.

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	The Pattern of Artistic Nationalism: Mexico's Pavilion at the Venice Biennale in the Fifties Amelia Chávez Santiago Abstract Mexico's Pavilion at the Venice Biennale first exhibited in 1950, followed by another in 1952 and a final iteration in 1958. These three national pavilions showcased the canon of modern Mexican art, emphasising Figuration and Realism through painting and engraving. These artistic trends were strongly supported and promoted by the Mexican government, which sought to officially represent the nation through the most prominent artists of the Post-revolutionary Artistic Movement. This text also discusses the Biennale's relaunch in 1948, the exhibition's goals, and the significance of the invitation extended to Mexico by the Biennale Organising Committee. The active collaboration between Mexico's cultural representatives and Italian organisers was crucial in realising Mexico's initial exhibitions. From the outset of Mexico's first participation, there was close collaboration between Fernando Gamboa, the commissioner responsible for Mexico's Pavilion, and Rodolfo Pallucchini, the General Secretary of Biennale. Noteworthy, the role of these cultural agents was crucial in ensuring the success of Mexico's initial exhibitions at the Venice Biennale. Gamboa played a key role in the selection and exhibition of the Mexican works; while Pallucchini, as part of the Organising Committee, was instrumental in driving the Biennale's structural and conceptual renewal in the post-War period. Keywords Pavilion of Mexico, Postrevolutionary Artistic Movement (<i>Movimiento Artístico Posrevolucionario</i>), Modern Mexican Art, Fernando Gamboa, Rodolfo Pallucchini		
OBOE Journal On Biennials and Other Exhibitions ISSN 2724-086X obojournal.com	Published online: December 31, 2024 To cite this article: Amelia Chávez Santiago, "The Pattern of Artistic Nationalism: Mexico's Pavilion at the Venice Biennale in the Fifties", <i>OBOE Journal</i> 5, no. 1 (2024): 170-186. To link to this article: https://doi.org/10.25432/2724-086X/5.1.0007		

The Pattern of Artistic Nationalism: Mexico's Pavilion at the Venice Biennale in the Fifties

Amelia Chávez Santiago

Introduction. The modernising of Mexico's cultural apparatus

The National Institute of Fine Arts and Literature (Instituto Nacional de Bellas Artes y Literatura, hereafter INBAL) was founded on December 1, 1946, to oversee the administration of Fine Arts.¹ Just like INBAL's direction, positions in its various Departments were held by figures that represented the intellectual and artistic vanguard of Mexican cultural life. Following the sudden death of painter Julio Castellanos, museographer Fernando Gamboa² was appointed head of the Department of Plastic Arts (Departamento de Artes Plásticas, hereafter DAP), the office that among its functions organised national and international exhibitions. Gamboa, who already had a substantial career in the field of museums, was promoted to two other positions in INBAL. In 1947 he was named director of the recently founded National Museum of Plastic Arts (Museo Nacional de Artes Plásticas, hereafter MNAP), and in 1950 he started as INBAL's Institute's Deputy Director.

The MNAP was inaugurated on September 15, 1947, as the first museum in the country equipped with state-of-the-art museography to exhibit national collections that were scattered between the National Museum and the Academia de San Carlos. Gamboa's main selection and exhibition criterion was grounded in quality and cultural significance. Thus, Fernando Gamboa based MNAP's museography discourse on highlighting Mexico's cultural greatness

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The project for restructuring the cultural apparatus consisted in the rescue of arts and its strengthening based on education, creation and dissemination. Mexico's authorities were the main Maecenas and promotor of national artistic production, backing, promoting and fostering music, dance, theatre, literature, architecture and the plastic arts. To learn more about the matter see: Miguel Alemán Valdés, *Legado Cultural. La creación del Instituto Nacional de Bellas Artes, 1948-1952* (México: Fundación Miguel Alemán A.C., 2017); *Revista México en el Arte del Instituto Nacional de Bellas Artes, 1948-1952* (México: Fundación Miguel Alemán A.C., 2020).

2

Fernando Gamboa (Mexico City, 1909-1990). His legacy bears a high cultural value, since, by establishing the parameters for exhibiting Mexican art, he is often considered the founder of Mexico's museography. He was founder and director of museums and responsible for selection of artistic pieces at a national level. He was also primarily responsible for organising panoramic Mexican exhibitions abroad, such as the presentation of Mexico's Pavilion at World Fairs from 1965 to 1970. From 1972 to 1981 he was director of the Museum of Modern Art in Mexico City. From 1983 to 1990 he was director of *Fomento Cultural Banamex*. For more information see his archive website: promotorafernandogamboa.org/index.html, last accessed April 2024.

from Pre-Hispanic times to the modern era through a continuous art historical narrative. By emphasising the importance of rescuing significant artistic values from oblivion, Gamboa was reaffirming the stature of major figures, and supporting the emerging generation of Mexican artists who would be part of future exhibitions.³

Clearly, Mexico's cultural policy favored the main exponents of the Postrevolutionary Artistic Movement,⁴ by selecting their works for national collections and exhibitions, such as those at the Venice Biennale. From 1947 to 1949, the epicentre of artistic appreciation, MNAP's were dedicated to temporary exhibitions and homages to José Clemente Orozco (1883-1949), David Alfaro Siqueiros (1896-1974), Diego Rivera (1886-1957), and Rufino Tamayo (1899-1991), who were the artists officially "instituted"⁵ at the beginning of Miguel Alemán's government. As the commissioner of exhibitions, Gamboa played a vital role in circulating Mexico's identity through the arts. His diplomatic ability as a cultural agent and commissioner of exhibitions was fundamental for initiating international exchanges through exhibition projects that facilitated political agreements, established commercial ties, and increased tourism. Initially focused on Latin-American countries, these efforts later extended to Europe. Since 1948, several European capitals had expressed a strong interest in hosting exhibitions of Mexican Art, which would imply adequate planning and considerable investment from the Mexican government. The project began to take shape with the involvement of INBAL's director, orchestra director Carlos Chávez, at UNESCO's Fourth Meeting carried out in Paris in 1949.⁶

Reinstatement of the art exhibitions after the war

After the fall of fascism, Italy's Committee of National Liberation assumed governance and began a process of reorganisation. In the cultural sphere, Extraordinary Commissioners were assigned for administering Autonomous Entities which cut out fascist policies and proclaimed the new "Fundamental Principles of Republic of Italy's Constitution".

As an autonomous entity, the Venice Biennale operated for years without financial support from the state. Therefore, in 1947, in response to the urgent need for funding to organise the first artistic gathering of the post-war period, a request for resources was submitted to the Ministry of Public Tasks.⁷ Some

3

"The exalting of our great artistic values – Orozco, Rivera, Siqueiros and Tamayo –, the consolidating of immediate values – O'Gorman, Orozco Romero, Zalce, Anguiano, Guerrero Galván and others – and the birth of new values – Nishizawa, Nicolás Moreno, Carlos Sánchez, Castro Pacheco and others – incorporated to the group that Mexico's School of Plastic Arts represented, the revelation of Mexican values of the past – Bustos, Manila, Icaza and others –". Fernando Gamboa, "Memorias del Instituto Nacional de Bellas Artes: presencia de las Artes Plásticas: 1952", in *México en el Arte*, no. 12 (1952): 75.

4

Nowadays to think of a "Mexican School of Painting" or "Mexican Muralism" as a valid and descriptive concept of plastic activity in the first half of 20th century is now obsolete. A more precise definition for the ensemble of arts emerging after Mexico's revolution would be "Postrevolutionary Artistic Movement", based on the following reflection: "to overcome these reductive ideas or myths it's important to consider that during the twenties and the thirties there were different pictorial languages that made up, more than a school, a heterogenous movement characterized by the search for distinct languages, linked to artistic modernity", Ana Torres Arroyo, "¿Ruptura?", *Revista Discurso Visual*, (July-September 2004), <https://discursovisual.net/dvweb01/agora/agotorres.htm>, last accessed January 2022. Translation by the author.

5

José Teixeira Coelho, *Diccionario crítico de política cultural: cultura e imaginario*, (España: Gedisa, 2009), 56.

6

"La Delegación de México ante la UNESCO, lista", *El Nacional*, August 16, 1949. "Sale a Europa el maestro Carlos Chávez", *El Universal*, August 29, 1949. "Exposición mexicana para la UNESCO", *Excelsior*, August 16, 1949.

7

Giandomenico Romanelli, "Biennale 1895: the Birth, Infancy and First Acts of a Creature of Genius", in *Venice and the Biennale. Itineraries of Taste: Catalog of an exhibition in honor of the one-hundredth anniversary of the Biennale*, (Milan: Fabbri Editori, 1995), 36.

pavilions⁸ showed signs of deterioration due to neglect and their temporary use as storage facilities, but only minimal restoration work was required. The Venice Biennale, then, was revived under the supervision of architect, designer, and politician Giovanni Ponti,⁹ who served as President and Special Commissioner, and under the direction of art historian Rodolfo Pallucchini,¹⁰ who was appointed General Secretary. Pallucchini skillfully facilitated cultural exchange between institutions, commissioners and artists when supervising the first art encounters after the war, leaving a deep mark on international art history.

The Subcommittee of Plastic Arts was essential to establish educational and cultural goals at the Venice Biennale. It was formed by five modern artists – Carlo Carrà (1881-1966), Felice Casorati (1881-1966), Marino Marini (1924-1997), Giorgio Morandi (1890-1964), and Pio Semeghini (1878-1964) – and four intellectuals with significant contributions to art criticism and teaching: Nino Barbantini (1884-1952), Roberto Longhi (1890-1970), Carlos Ludovico Ragghianti (1910-1987), and Lionello Venturi (1885-1961). The plurality of visions proved foundational for the first post-War Biennale, showcasing different pictorial currents and art criteria.¹¹ This approach marked a departure from totalitarian aesthetic principles, distancing the event from Fascist ideology and re-establishing the Venice Biennale as a truly international platform for art [fig. 1].

Rodolfo Pallucchini articulated that the first post-war exhibition would be a ‘new ambience of liberty’, that consisted in going back to the basic principles upon which the Biennale was founded: the attraction of a European audience, and the presence of international exhibitions with educational and informative objectives for young Italian artists. These aimed not to enclose art into schools, tendencies or representative works of a historic or social moment, but rather to see them as productions coming from the artists individual decisions and mutual influences.¹² Pallucchini recognised art based on the analysis of the pure

8

Before 1907, the Palazzo dell' Esposizione or Italy Palace and latter Central Pavilion, was the only place to exhibit the work of foreign and Italian artists. Due to the building's limits of space were suggested building national pavilions. National pavilions situated in the Giardini are historic samples of the epoch's architecture and represent the national image, although many of them have been sold, rebuilt and modified. To see the nationalistic identity that each nation has given to its pavilion and approach to geopolitical relations that also correspond to power prerogatives in the Venetian space, see Joel Robinson, "Folkloric Modernism: Venice Giardini della Biennale and the Geopolitics of the Architecture", *Open Arts Journal*, no. 2 (Winter 2013-2014), https://openartsjournal.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/11/oaj_issue2_robinson_final_v2.pdf, last accessed March 2024. Anita Orzes, "La Bienal de Venecia y sus ciudades", *Revistas Científicas Universidad Complutense de Madrid, Anales de Historia del Arte* 24 (2014).

9

Giovanni Ponti (Milan, 1891-1979). Architect, industrial designer, artist and advertising agent. He was teacher at Milan Polytechnic, instigator of Italian design in the post-War period, founder and director of *Domus* and *Style* magazines. He actively participated in Italy's resistance against fascism. After the war, he backed Christian Democratic Party in Veneto region and was elected deputy of Chamber of Rome and Receiver of Venice in the first democratic elections.

10

Rodolfo Pallucchini (Milan, 1908-Venice, 1989). Art historian, academic and public officer. He was General Secretary of the Venice Biennale from 1948 to 1957. From 1958 to 1973 he was Presidency of Centro Internazionale Studi Architettura Andrea Palladio. In 1968 he entered as National Member of Accademia dei Lincei. In 1972 he chaired the Institute of Art History of Fondazione Giorgio Cini, the institution which now houses his personal archive. See Bruce Boucher, "Rodolfo Pallucchini, obituary", *The Burlington Magazine* 131, no. 1039 (October 1989), 708, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/883995>, last accessed March 2024.

11

See Irene Parentini, "The decade of 1940 till the postwar: from Mariani's latest Biennales to Rodolfo Pallucchini's first ones", in *Artisti lucchesi alla Biennale di Venezia* (MA diss.: Università Ca' Foscari Venezia, 2022), <https://unitesi.unive.it/retrieve/863e4870-b80c-4d42-a38d-cfd31c6f60f/883095-1263544.pdf>, last accessed May 2024.

12

Maria Vittoria Martini, "La Biennale di Venezia 1968-1978. La Rivoluzione Incompiuta" (PhD diss.: Università Ca' Foscari Venezia, 2011), <https://iris.unive.it/handle/10579/1125>, last accessed November 2024. Giandomenico Romanelli, "Biennale 1895: the Birth, Infancy and First Acts of a Creature of Genius", in *Venice and the Biennale. Itineraries of taste*. (Italy: Fabbri Editori, 1995). See also, Lawrence Alloway, "The Venice Biennale, 1895-1968: From Salon to Goldfish Bowl" (New York: Graphic Society, 1968), 120-145.

fig. 1

The Subcommittee of Plastic Arts in Palazzo Giustiniani, ca. 1947. From left to right: Pio Semeghini, Felice Casorati, Nino Barbantini, Antonio Gnan (standing), Carlo Ludovico Ragghianti, Carlo Carrà, Domenico Varagnolo, Rodolfo Pallucchini, Lionello Venturi, Giorgio Morandi, Roberto Longhi and Marino Marini. Photo taken from the web: Accademia degli Incerti. Fototeca italiana del secolo breve.



form, rating works from a formalist perspective, that is, appreciating the pieces for the means adopted: the use of colour, strokes, technique, and any information contained within the piece itself.¹³ Another approach upon which the Biennale's revival depended was the open call to retrospective exhibitions and to artistic tendencies yet unknown. This inclusive approach led to significant success in the early postwar iterations, enabling the Venice Biennale to regain its position as a leader in the international art world. The first of these opened on May 1, 1948, with the participation of fourteen nations.¹⁴ The Giardini became a neutral space in the world's political cartography, allowing it "to become a means to strengthen modern art's historical-artistic canon".¹⁵

Winter 1947, the Venice Biennale sends an invitation to Mexico

The Biennale Organising Committee was highly invested in including the Mexican Post-Revolutionary Artistic Movement in the first post-war Biennale. Its interest was nurtured through exchanges of ideas with artists, art critics, and diplomatic representatives who had experienced Mexican art during their visits in the 1940s—years marked by cultural effervescence and significant artistic exchange between

¹³

Pallucchini, specialist in Renaissance Venetian art, renewed his analytical tools from the first postwar Biennale, when placing in his personal library modern books on Aesthetics, Ethic, Modern Art History and international exhibitions, see Alessandro del Puppo, "La biblioteca del novecentista", in *Saggi e Memorie di storia dell'arte* 35 (2011): 168, www.jstor.org/stable/43140568?seq=2#metadata_info_tab_contents.html, last accessed May 2024.

¹⁴

At the Italia Palace individual exhibitions of Pablo Picasso, Paul Klee and Oscar Kokoschka, the Austrian artist scorned by the Nazi regime as a producer of "degenerate art", were held. Pieces were also exhibited by Vincent van Gogh, Carlos Carrà, De Chirico and Morandi. Another exhibition the Biennale's Secretary paid attention to, was around one hundred pieces of French Impressionism which were placed at the German Pavilion. A great protagonist of the 1948 Biennale was American gallerist and collector Peggy Guggenheim, patron and friend of European and American artists from the first half of 20th century. Collezione Peggy Guggenheim was shown at the Greece pavilion owing to that country's absence during its civil war. There were pieces in the fields of Expressionism, Cubism, Surrealism, Abstract Expressionism and Action painting.

¹⁵

Stefano Collicelli Cagol and Vittoria Martini, "The Venice Biennale at Its Turning Points. 1948 and the Aftermath of 1968", in Noemi de Haro García, Patricia Mayayo, and Jesús Carrillo (eds.), *Making Art History in Europe After 1945* (New York: Routledge, 2020), 87.

Mexican and foreign artists. The first rapprochement between the Biennale Organising Committee and Mexico's government representatives occurred on December 8, 1947, through a letter by Ponti to Mexico's ambassador in Italy, Mariano Armendariz del Castillo:

It would be very welcome if this Presidency could present Mexican art, which is rich in elements of exceptional interest, by little known artists, and exhibitions of Aztec art, which, although somewhat reduced because of a lack space, could be sufficiently explainable. In reference to contemporary art, we've already asked Valentine Gallery, of New York, for the loan of a dozen of Tamayo's paintings. None the less, we'd like very much to present the work of other Mexican artists of today, especially Diego Rivera, José Clemente Orozco, Miguel Covarrubias, who in our opinion, could represent the Mexican art of today with dignity. All said, two halls could be set aside for Mexico: one for exhibiting Aztec art and other for showing contemporary artists. I sincerely hope this participation is but the first step towards a regular and richer participation in Venice Biennales of Figurative Arts.¹⁶

In response, Armendariz del Castillo committed to sending the request to Mexico's government, although only smaller archaeological pieces could be sent, owing to the fact that "It's impossible to move sculptures from the ages before Cortes".¹⁷ In a subsequent letter dated December 29, Ponti made a specific request for works by Diego Rivera, José Clemente Orozco, and Rufino Tamayo.¹⁸

Ten days before the Venice Biennale's opening, Alfonso Guerra sent a letter to Manuel Gual Vidal, a senior official at the Secretariat of Public Education (Secretaría de Educación Pública, hereafter SEP) and immediate superior to INBAL's director. In this letter, Guerra emphasised the Biennale's significance in Europe's cultural landscape and how "Mexico's plastic arts have awoken in Italy great interest. This is why we're inclined to believe our contribution shall be well received [...] I beg you let us be aware of the agreement taken regarding the invitation in question as soon possible".¹⁹ Ultimately, on June 7, INBAL's director replied to Guerra, acknowledging the international relevance of the Venice Biennale. However, he added that "the plan of Plastic Arts activities of this Institute for the current year is totally finished, it being impossible to consider the participation of Mexico at the Venice Biennale".²⁰

1950. Mexico attends the Venice Biennale

In December 1949, Giovanni Ponti and Rodolfo Pallucchini extended a new invitation to INBAL Director Carlos Chávez and Subdirector Fernando Gamboa through Benedetto d'Acunzo, the chargé d'affaires at the Italian Embassy in Mexico. The Organising Committee sought the inclusion of Mexican visual arts in the

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Letter from Giovanni Ponti to Mariano Armendáriz del Castillo, December 8, 1947. La Biennale di Venezia: Archivio Storico Arti Contemporanee, Serie Paesi, 40. Messico -1947-1958. XXIV-Messico. Hereafter: ASAC: Serie Paesi, 40. XXIV Messico. Translation by the author.

17

Letter from Mariano Armendáriz del Castillo a Giovanni Ponti, December 26, 1947. ASAC: Serie Paesi, 40. XXIV Messico.

18

Letter from Giovanni Ponti to Mariano Armendáriz del Castillo, December 29, 1947. ASAC: Serie Paesi, 40. Messico -1947-1958, folder: XXIV-Messico.

19

Communication of Alfonso Guerra, Major Officer of SRE to Manuel Gual Vidal, Secretariat of Public Education. Archivo Histórico Genaro Estrada Secretaría de Relaciones Exteriores, México. III/825(45) /24. III-1189-9. Hereafter: AHGE-SRE.

20

Communication of Carlos Chávez to Alfonso Guerra, February 27, 1948. AHGE-SRE- III/825(45) /24. III-1189-9.

second post-war Biennale, scheduled for 1950. They requested a pictorial sample that would bring together the production of four artists with decades of experience: Diego Rivera, José Clemente Orozco, David Alfaro Siqueiros, plus Rufino Tamayo, known for his semifigurative plastic language, both modern and international. In exchange, Benedetto d'Acunzo offered support to facilitate transportation, exhibition, and return of the artworks, promising two halls at the Palazzo d'Italia and covering the costs of the catalogue publication and all related expenses.²¹

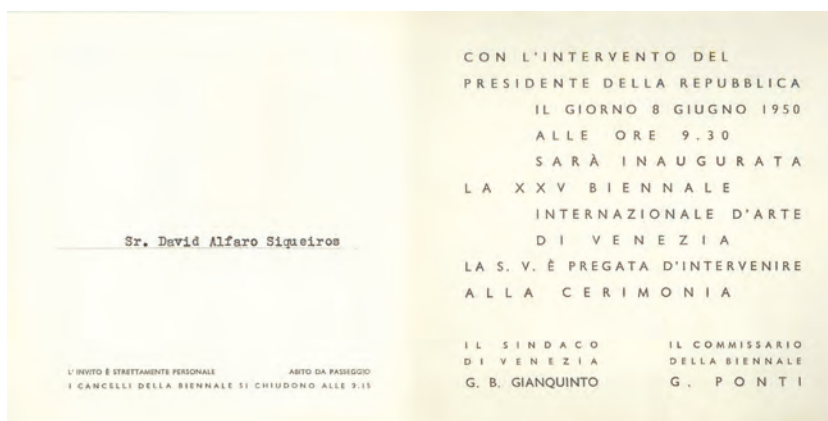
In order to enjoy a closer interaction, the Organising Committee relied on the support of painter Guido Caprotti Pacchetti,²² who was residing in Mexico and had attended Diego Rivera's National Exhibition: Fifty Years of his Artistic Work (*Cincuenta años de labor artística*) at the Palace of Fine Arts in 1949. Caprotti, alongside Arnaldo Cosco, the Italian Embassy's cultural attaché in Mexico, had a first meeting with Fernando Gamboa with favourable results.²³ In addition, Benedetto d'Acunzo sent the invitation to Manuel Tello Baurraud, Mexico's Foreign Relations secretary, to ensure that the relevant official institutions were informed of the open invitation to participate in this cultural event.

For Caprotti, Mexican muralism was a revelation, as he described it as having "A very interesting profound local character".²⁴ He wasn't the only one for whom the Mexican plastic arts generated interest, since due to the scarcity of cultural exchange between the two continents, the plastic arts of the Postrevolutionary Artistic Movement were practically unknown.

Given the logistical support offered and the existing interest of the Mexican government in presenting its art in Europe, the invitation was accepted. Fernando Gamboa, INBAL's Deputy Director and head of the DAP, was appointed commissioner with works by Rivera, Siqueiros, Orozco and Tamayo, and set aside the original plan to include a pre-Columbian art collection [fig. 2 and fig. 3]. Mexico was originally assigned a hall within the Palazzo d'Italia, a site for exhibitions shared by various groups of Italian artists and those nations attending for first time. On their behalf, Romania and Czechoslovakia, each with its pavilion in the Giardini, declined to participate in the Biennale. Both nations, having recently joined the Eastern Bloc, were now aligned with the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics. The Biennale Organising Committee consequently offered the

fig. 2
Cover of Venice Biennale
invitation sent to David Alfaro
Siqueiros, 1950
© Centro de Investigación y
Documentación Siqueiros-
INBAL.

fig. 3
Inside of Venice Biennale
invitation sent to David Alfaro
Siqueiros, 1950
© Centro de Investigación y
Documentación Siqueiros-
INBAL.



²¹
Communication of Fernando Gamboa sent to Alfonso Guerra, February 27, 1950. AHGE-SRE-III/825(45) /24. III-1189-9.

²²
Guido Caprotti (1887-1966) was a painter of Costumbrista scenes and landscapes; Mexico's government named him Member of the Athenaeum of Science and Arts and he was given a Cross and Badge "General Ignacio Comonfort", Mexico's Civil Order and Great Cross of Aztec Eagle.

²³
ASAC: Serie Paesi, 40, folder: XXIV-Messico.

²⁴
Manuscript letter of Guido Caprotti to Romolo Bazzoni, September 14, 1949. ASAC: Serie Paesi, 40. Messico -1947-1958, folder: XXIV-Messico.

Romanian Pavilion²⁵ to Mexico for its exhibition, providing a dedicated space for each artist's planned display. This loan turned out to be a great opportunity for Mexico as it allowed a national debut in a national pavilion and placed that country at the exhibition's epicentre, at the same level as nations that had participated for decades.

Gamboa brought together a total of sixty works: thirteen by Orozco, seventeen by Rivera, fourteen by Siqueiros, and sixteen by Tamayo.²⁶ He secured loans from the MNAP collection, the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA), Mexican and American private collectors, and American galleries.²⁷ In general, the willingness of collectors and institutions to lend these works reflected the solid networks of institutional exchange and the strong social and cultural ties that Fernando Gamboa had established as a high-level cultural agent representing the Mexican government.

On June 8, 1950, Mexico's Pavilion was officially inaugurated by Guido Gonella, Italy's Minister of Public Institutions. The event was marked by Gonella, Gamboa, and Pallucchini discussing Orozco's paintings *Skin in Blue* and *The Dismembered Man*, both created in 1948 as part of the series *Los Teúles*. [fig. 4]. Mexico's exhibition started in Romania's pavilion lobby. This was indicated in Gamboa's instructions as a "small Introductory Hall" housing one work by each artist: *Ethnography* (1939) by Siqueiros, *Animals* (1941) by Tamayo, *The Dead* (1943) by Orozco and *Flower Carrier* (1935) by Rivera. The Romanian Pavilion's architectonic elements – high walls and three wide salons that allowed for the free flow of visitors – helped to better exhibit pieces on a grand scale. They also evidence an element referring directly to exhibition characteristics in Fernando Gamboa's museographies: pieces were placed without chronological ordering, introductory texts or documents displaying titles, dates, or techniques.²⁸ At the 1950 Mexico Pavilion the spectator's aesthetic experience commenced from their own observations, encouraging each viewer to relate the iconographic content to their own socio-cultural context.

The Mexican Pavilion set a lineal narrative of the nation's history, which iconographically revealed the proposed foundations for constructing a nationalist identity through key events like the Conquest, the Revolution and the Modern Age. This narrative was conveyed through the position of the artworks.²⁹ The museographer displayed Tamayo's pieces in the left hall, Rivera's and Orozco's in the central hall and Siqueiros's in the right hall. By placing Orozco and Rivera in the entrance Gamboa proposed an introductory pathway towards the nationalist plastic arts, highlighting the works of two muralists with already consolidated careers.

25

Designed by Italian architect Brenno del Giudice and built in 1932, it serves as an example of nationalist architecture of the Fascist period. It was conceived as an "art salon" with three halls on a rectangular base. The most important central hall was flanked by two smaller ones. In 1962, the walls that divided the three halls were demolished, leaving a larger exhibition space.

26

"Messico", *Catalogo Generale XXV Biennale di Venezia* (Venice: Alfieri Editore, 1950), 342-353.

27

From MoMA, Gamboa requested three works by Siqueiros – *Ethnography* (1939), *Echo of a Scream* (1937), and *The Sob* (1939) – as well as Orozco's *Zapatistas* (1931) and Tamayo's *Animals* (1941). Additionally, he obtained Rivera's *Flower Day* (1925) from the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art.

28

Ana Garduño, "El curador de la Guerra Fría", in Carmen Gaitán Rojo (ed.), *Fernando Gamboa el arte del riesgo* (Instituto Nacional de Bellas Artes-Museo Mural Diego Rivera, 2009), 19-21.

29

For Dr. Molina Posadas, Gamboa's museography corresponds to a "historic scheme that explained Mexico as a continuity. The other way of concentration and exhibiting objects in a museum has a narrative rationality, that is, it tells a tale. This is what may be seen in exhibition "Mexican Art: from Pre-Colombian Times to the Present Day" (1952-1953). What came first was the process of separating objects from their specific historic contexts so as to resituate them as part of an absolute of atemporal and universal art. Historical particularities were left out and all objects were consolidated into a tripartite concrete narrative. Thus, all parts refer to this metatext and in so far as belonging to it, Mexico was thus explained, with meaning attributed to birth, resistance, consolidation, and giving as a result the notion of nationality". Carlos A. Molina, "Espacios de la mexicanidad", in *Revista Especialidades* 2, no. 1 (January-June 2012): 115, 124, and 135, http://especialidades.cua.uam.mx/legal2_1_molina/, last accessed May 2024. Translation by the author.

fig. 4
Mexico's Pavilion, 1950. From left to right in the foreground: the museographer Fernando Gamboa, Guido Gonella Minister of Public Education of the Italian Republic and Rodolfo Pallucchini, Venice Biennale's General Secretary
© Promotora Cultural Fernando Gamboa.



Instead, those pieces by Rivera that were chosen reflected a naïve and folkloric vision of Mexican life, including portraits, festivals, and children: *Dance in Tehuantepec* (1928), *Nocturnal Landscape* (1947), *Indian Girl with Coral Necklace* (1926), *Portrait of Ignacio Sánchez* (1927); and works that refer distinguished people of Mexican political and social life: *Portrait of Benito Juárez* (1948), *Portrait of Enriqueta Dávila* (1949) and *Portrait of Columba Domínguez* (1950), [fig. 5]. Finally, works referring to markets and the sale of flowers like *Flower Carrier* (1935) were placed in the foyer and labelled “Opere caratteristiche di Rivera” (Characteristic Works of Rivera).

The paintings by Siqueiros and Tamayo were placed in opposing halls, with the intention to underline their distinct relevance: of Siqueiros Gamboa intended to emphasise the three-dimensional paintings, the Masonite frames, and his experimentations with materials such as Pyroxyline [fig. 6]. In the case

fig. 5
Hall with paintings of Diego Rivera. From left to right in the foreground: *Dancer Resting* (1939), *Portrait of Lupe Marín* (1938), *Portrait of Columba Domínguez* (1950), *Pre-Columbian America* (1950) and *Portrait Enriqueta Dávila* (1949)
© Promotora Cultural Fernando Gamboa.



of Tamayo, the semi-figurative paintings made with a mastery of colour whose contents reflected the uncertainty of man before the global devastation and spiritual desolation of the post-War period. It is noteworthy that most of the work that Tamayo presented in the Mexican pavilion was available for sale, aligning with the Venice Biennale's guidelines on promoting the circulation and consumption of art. The director of Rome's National Gallery of Modern Art, Palma Bucarelli, purchased Tamayo's *The Scream* (1947)³⁰ for one million lire – a significant sum, as only a few paintings at the 1950 international exhibition matched or exceeded this price among the 576 works sold, which generally went for between 100,000 and 500,000 lire.³¹

Raymond Cogniat, Inspector of Fine Arts and President of the French Artistic Press Association, stated that:

Mexican art is the greatest revelation of the Biennale. We find ourselves before a totally original creation, which has been developed on the fringes of European influences and which has imposed itself with such vehemence that it is impossible to resist.³²

fig. 6
Hall with paintings by David Alfaro Siqueiros. From left to right: *Three Pumpkins* (1946), *The Devil in Church* (1947), *Self Portrait (El Coronelazo)* (1945), *Rock with Figures* (1947) and *Portrait of Angelica* (1947)
© Promotora Cultural Fernando Gamboa.



³⁰

Communication of Venice Biennale to Fernando Gamboa, October 7, 1950. Archive Promotora Cultural Fernando Gamboa, folder-B. Venecia.

³¹

Palma Bucarelli acquired five paintings in total, with the others being: *Cavallo, cavaliere e caseggiato* by Umberto Boccioni; *Ritratto* by Roberto Melli; *Amalassunta* by Osvaldo Licini; *Coppa chimerica* by Jean Arp and *El Grito* by Tamayo, in Giorgia Cicalini, "Palma Bucarelli e la Biennale di Venezia (1948-1968)", *Storie dell' arte contemporanea* 4, no. 1 (Venice: Edizioni Ca'Foscari, 2019): 129, www.edizionicafoscari.unive.it/media/pdf/books/978-88-6969-367-0/978-88-6969-367-0-ch-08_d3TK8kV.pdf.html, last accessed April 2024. See also Clarissa Ricci & Marie Tavinor (2021), "Art, market and agency at the Venice Biennale, 1895-1993", *Journal of Modern Italian Studies* 26, no. 4 (2021): 372-374.

³²

Jorge J. Crespo, "La exposición Bienal de Venecia y el arte de México", *Cuadernos Americanos* 53, no. 5 (September-October 1950): 295, www.icaadocs.mfah.org/s/es/item/758440#c=&m=&s=&cv=&xywh=-1673%2C0%2C5895%2C3299, last accessed September 2024. Translation by the author.

These remarks validated the notoriety that Mexican art had gained in Venice. Additional comments from the public included: “Their experiments with what’s new in art interest even the profane”, “The three halls occupied by Mexicans are always full of people”, “Monumental painting, about which much has been said, though few have seen it, now it’s presented for first time before a European public”, “Its dramatism puts you on your knees”, “Let’s return to Mexico, one can hear it everywhere in the exhibition, which undoubtedly is the best praise when it has to do with exposing over 3000 pieces”.³³ The Mexican pavilion, then, was undoubtedly a pleasant surprise for the European public that attended and visited the exhibition.

In addition to official prizes, monetary awards were provided to extend the grants funded by donors and private organisations from industrial, commercial, and cultural sectors, amounting to approximately seven million lire. Among these awards were prizes donated by Count Giuseppe Volpi and the São Paulo Museum of Modern Art. On June 8 and 9, 1950, an official selection of winning artists was made by an international jury composed by the commissioners of national pavilions and, among them was also Fernando Gamboa. The Prize Presidency of the Council of Ministers for a Foreign Painter was given to Henri Matisse. The deliberations then turned to the Second Prize for Foreign Painter, which was also awarded by São Paulo Museum of Modern Art. Due to a tie, another round of voting was made. Unanimously this time, the muralist David Alfaro Siqueiros was chosen, winning 500.000 lire.³⁴ When asked why he believed the jury selected him over the two European artists, Siqueiros attributed his win to:

The singularity of Mexican art production, with its human content, with man at the centre of the aesthetic movement, when the basis for a new humanism is sought for, when it’s been battered by two past wars and with another in view.³⁵

The third path of art and new realism

The works displayed in Mexico’s Pavilion became a revelation, highlighting Siqueiros’s innovative techniques, Orozco’s dramatism, Rivera’s Costumbrista portraits and scenes, and Tamayo’s subtlety and vibrant colours. The Postrevolutionary Artistic Movement was distinguished as an original creation charting a unique course between the ideological poles of Social realism and Abstract expressionism. At the same while, European art criticism justified its interest and approval when trying to establish cultural relations between European and Mexican art. They were identifying a ‘common inheritance’ that would integrate Modern Mexican art with the history of international art. The Biennale Organising Committee’s intent with the exhibition of the four Mexican artists was explained by Rodolfo Pallucchini: “We’re interested above all in these painters because they set in doubt the problem of art’s content, a problem that is on the table, precisely amongst Italian painters at the Biennale”.³⁶

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Fragments taken from art criticisms sent to Secretariat of Foreign Relations by Mexico’s ambassador in Sweden, Gilberto Bosques Saldivar, between June and July, 1950. AHGE-SRE- III/825(45) /24. III-1189-9.

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The 500,000 lire reward in reality came down to a symbolic prize worth, at the time, six thousand Mexican pesos, half of which Rome’s Gallery of Modern Art paid to Tamayo for his work *The Scream* (1947). One must recall the lire was going through constant inflation due to the circumstances of the post-War period.

35

Jorge J. Crespo de la Serna, “México triunfa en Venecia”, *Tiempo: Semanario de la vida y la verdad* 17, no. 426 (June, 1950): 24, www.icaadocs.mfah.org/s/es/item/759059#c=&m=&s=&cv=&xywh=-1673%2C0%2C5895%2C3299.html, last accessed June 2024. Translation by the author.

36

Jorge J. Crespo, “La exposición Bienal de Venecia y el arte de México”, 295, www.icaadocs.mfah.org/s/es/item/758440#c=&m=&s=&cv=&xywh=-1673%2C0%2C5895%2C3299.html, last accessed June 2024. Translation by the author.

Swedish art critic Gotthard Johansson held that Mexican plastic art represented 'The Third Path of Art'.³⁷ At the 1950 Biennale, a dilemma emerged between artists whose works aligned with new art movements and those who wished to continue engaging with political and social Realism. Although it seemed like a matter of aesthetic preference, the clash between Abstract expressionism and Social realism came to permeate various spheres, including politics.³⁸ Fernando Gamboa surely considered the polarisation established between Western and Eastern Europe, so he planned a selection of works for his exhibition that would prevent the Mexican pavilion from appearing on the Socialist side.³⁹ On a personal level, Gamboa advocated for an art that held human form and content, a stance aligned with the propositions of realism. Shortly after his participation as a curator in Europe, he explained that Mexican art should be considered as a *Neorealismo* (New Realism).⁴⁰ He thought of developing a series of articles about the Postrevolutionary Artistic Movement's debut in Europe, leaving a written record of the form and contents of the entire selection displayed in Mexico's Pavilion:

What is new Mexican realism? Ingredients that make it up: nationality, the theme, tradition, national temperament and idiosyncrasy. Colour, the individual and his people. Our age's sensitivity. Form's movement. New materials, traditional techniques and new techniques. Originality [...] Not imitation.⁴¹

Thirty engravers. Mexico's Pavilion in 1952

Mexico confirmed its attendance at beginning of 1952 with Fernando Gamboa as commissioner. Rodolfo Pallucchini confirmed Romania's Pavilion would, once again, house Mexican art,⁴² with the novelty it would share one showroom with six Guatemalan painters.⁴³

37

Gotthard Johansson, "El Tercer Camino del Arte", *Svenska Dagbladet* (July 6, 1950), 2. AHGE-SRE-III/825(45) /24. III-1189-9. In his article, Johansson explains that Mexican painting could bestow a renewed vision to international painting. From his point of view, Mexican art was both primitive and refined, national and modern, elements that would influence European art.

38

Abstract expressionism was a language that worked from the first years of the cultural cold war as an interlocutor for Western European countries to achieve economic and political agreements with both their European peers and the United States. See Nancy Jachec, "Anticommunism at home, Europeanism abroad: Italian Cultural Policy at the Venice Biennale, 1948-1958", in *Contemporary European History* 14, no. 2 (May 2005), <http://doi.org/10.1017/S0960777305002316>, last accessed September 2024. See also Giulia Quaggio, "El poder suave de las artes: la Bienal de Venecia y la diplomacia cultural entre Italia y España, 1948-1958", *Historia del Presente*, no. 21 (2013), <https://historiadelpresente.com/wp-content/uploads/2023/08/Giulia-Quaggio-3.pdf>, accessed September 2024. See also Frances Stonor Saunders, "Yanqui Doodles", in *Who Paid the Piper?: CIA and Cultural Cold War* (London: Granta Books, 2000).

39

Adriana Ortega Orozco, "La primera victoria del arte mexicano en Europa: La XXV Bienal de Venecia en 1950", pp. 157-172, in Dafne Cruz, Claudia Garay (eds.), *Recuperación de la memoria histórica de exposiciones de arte mexicano (1930-1950)* (México City: Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México-Posgrado en Historia del Arte, 2016), 164.

40

"Declaraciones del Sr. Fernando Gamboa, subdirector del INBA sobre su reciente viaje a Europa y el proyecto de exposición de arte mexicano", 1951, www.icaa.mfah.org/s/en/item/779886#c=&m=&s=&cv=&xywh=-1673%2C0%2C5895%2C3299.html, last accessed May 2024.

41

Archive Promotora Cultural Fernando Gamba, folder FB.B.Venecia. II/86. Translation by the author.

42

Russia, Romania, Hungary and Czechoslovakia did not accept the invitation to participate in the 1952 Venice Biennale. Rodolfo Pallucchini, "Introduzione", *Catalogo Generale XXVI Biennale di Venezia*, XII.

43

Carlos Mérida, Arturo Martínez, Miguel Alzamora Méndez, Dagoberto Vázquez Castañeda, Roberto Ossaye and Juan Jacobo Rodríguez Padilla.

fig. 7
Mexico's Pavilion, Central
Hall, 1952
© Promotora Cultural Fernando
Gamboa.



Mexico's Pavilion exhibited 134 engravings by thirty artists, fulfilling the objective to make Mexican engraving known in Europe and continuing the historical survey of its postrevolutionary visual arts [fig. 7]. It also meant minimum expenses, as the engravings correspond to works that were easy to transport, care for, and exhibit. Fernando Gamboa did not travel to Venice for the mounting and inauguration, maintaining correspondence with Pallucchini only. His attention focused on organising the major panoramic exhibition *Mexican Art: from Pre-Columbian Times to the Present Day* (*Arte mexicano: desde tiempos precolombinos a nuestros días*), scheduled to start in the summer of 1952,⁴⁴ and to be hosted in Paris, Stockholm, and London.

Carlos Chávez, Director of INBAL, brought the engravings to Venice, as he and other high-ranking officials were traveling to Europe for the opening of Mexico's primary exhibition in Paris. The engravings came from the MNAP in Mexico City and from private Mexican collectors like Margarita Valladares – widow of José Clemente Orozco – as well as Fernando Gamboa, Marte R. Gómez and Alvar Carrillo Gil.⁴⁵

The works spanned from the end of 19th to the first half 20th century: Manuel Manilla, José Guadalupe Posada, Diego Rivera, David Alfaro Siqueiros, José Clemente Orozco, and twenty-five members of the Popular Graphic Workshop (*Taller de Gráfica Popular*, hereafter TGP).⁴⁶ Fernando Gamboa gave continuity to retrospective exhibitions of national visual arts, honouring the artists who laid

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The exhibition began on May 20, 1952, in the Museum of Modern Art in Paris, while the general inauguration of XXVI Venice Biennale was on June 14, 1952.

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Rodolfo Pallucchini was somewhat concerned that the Mexican display of engravings would closely resemble the grand exhibition planned for Paris, since this would jeopardise the uniqueness of the Mexico Pavilion in Venice. It was found that several engravings were presented at both exhibitions, some of Manilla, Posada, Méndez, Andrea Flores, amongst others. However, in Paris, works by other engravers were also exhibited: Dolores Cueto, Jean Charlot, Óscar Frías, Mariano Paredes, Antonio Pujol, Ramón Sosa Montes. See *Catalogue Art Mexicain: du précolombien a nos jours*, vol. II (1952).

46

The members of the TGP were Andrea Gómez, Ángel Bracho, Ignacio Aguirre, Carlos Lang Alvarado, Luis Arenal, Ávila Abelardo, Arturo García Bustos, Alberto Beltrán, Abelardo Ávila, Alfredo Zalce Torres, Carlos Alvarado Lang, Everardo Ramírez, Francisco Dosamantes, Fernando Castro Pacheco, Franco Lázaro Gómez, Francisco Mora, Federico Cantú, Ignacio Aguirre, Isidoro Ocampo, Jesús Escobedo, José Chávez Morado, Leopoldo Méndez, Luis Arenal, and Pablo O'Higgins.

the groundwork for the development of Mexico's modern engraving. It is evident that his decision reflected his wide knowledge of Modern Mexican art and his understanding of what both the public and art critics would expect from the Venice Pavilion.

The TGP works included woodcuts and linoleum prints in black ink on paper, with only a few lithographs, most created during the 1930s and 1940s. Themes included realistic compositions, ethnographic portraits, popular festivals, and national landscapes.⁴⁷ Some of the works were originally made to support social and trade union causes, for example the repudiation of the Second World War and rejection of Nazism and Fascism. As such, they were often reproduced in flyers and distributed in international congresses, thus forming part of the history of the political and social struggles of the time, such as the World Movement for Peace.

Mexico was looking for another international prize

As mentioned above, David Alfaro Siqueiros won "Second Prize for Foreign Painter" at the 1950 Biennale, so the Mexican museographer focused on engraving in hopes that Mexico's Pavilion would obtain the "Biennale Presidency Prize Reserved for a Foreign Engraver". In his first communication with Pallucchini confirming Mexico's presence at the 1952 Biennale, Gamboa expressed his ambition that another Mexican artist attain acknowledgment:

Quite frankly I yearn for great success for the Venice Biennale that you and other such good friends in the city direct and organize so magnificently. And on my behalf, I don't hide from you that I wish to attain First International Prize for my country's art engraving.⁴⁸

Since the prize was only awarded to living artists, Gamboa's gamble was based on two engravers: Leopoldo Méndez (1902-1969) and Alfredo Zalce (1908-2003), founders of the TPG in 1937. Gamboa had known both artists for years; he had attended the National School of Plastic Arts with Zalce, and he and Méndez has worked together in the early 1930s on SEP's "Cultural Missions" as teachers of Plastic arts in elementary schools. The exhibition included twenty-three pieces by Méndez and ten by Zalce.

Among Alfredo Zalce's displayed printings was *Mexico Turns into a Great City* (1947). The engraving is a depiction of unemployment, hunger, misery, and begging. In the centre of the print it is possible to see numerous piled up constructions, from among which emerge figures of different sizes, a naked and malnourished child, as well as shoeless men and a woman in tattered clothing. Facing the buildings that form the composition's centre, a man with a troubled expression searches for a rubbish sack in front of a skinny dog. It is a scene the engraver actually saw firsthand while walking home, the piece criticised the social inequalities brought about by the accelerated urbanisation of Mexico City in the mid-1940s [fig. 8]. Unfortunately, it wasn't a Mexican artist that won the "Biennale Presidency Prize Reserved for a Foreign Engraver", which went instead to Emil Nolde, German engraver and painter, in recognition of his contributions to German expressionism.⁴⁹

47

La Biennale di Venezia: Archivio Storico Arti Contemporanee, "Partecipazione nazionali: Messico". www.asac.labiennale.org/attivita/arti-visive/annali?anno=1952, last accessed April 2024.

48

Letter of Fernando Gamboa to Rodolfo Pallucchini, January 26, 1952. ASAC, 1952: Paesi – Messico. Translation by the author.

49

Emil Nolde, (1867-1956). Was another artist put on trial during the nazi regime. Several of his works were part of the exhibition "Degenerate Art" of 1937. See Germán Padinger, "Arte Degenerado: a 80 años de la más degradante exposición organizada por los nazis en Múnich", www.infobae.com/america/cultura-america/2017/07/19/arte-degenerado-a-80-anos-de-la-mas-degradante-exposicion-organizada-por-los-nazis-en-munich/html, last accessed June 2024.

fig. 8

Alfredo Zalce, *Mexico Turns into a Great City* (1947). Mexico's Pavilion, 1952. Image was taken from the Web: <https://www.arquine.com/mexico-se-convierte-en-una-gran-ciudad-notas-a-partir-de-un-grabado/>.



Certainly, Mexico's second pavilion didn't enjoy the same success as the previous one. That display was seen by critics and the public as an "exhibition in white and black", a metaphor signalling that it did not meet the nuanced expectations set by previous displays.⁵⁰

Mexico's pavilion in 1958. "The unfortunate selection of mexican painting"

It is worth mentioning that Mexico didn't attend at the Venice Biennale of 1954 and 1956, mainly due to the change of public officials and the limited resources destined for cultural dissemination during Adolfo Ruiz Cortines's 6-year term (1952-1958), but in the last year of government, the invitation to attend the Venice Biennale was resumed.⁵¹

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Adriana Ortiz Castañares, "Historia del pabellón mexicano en la Bienal de Venecia", in Erika Galicia, Fernando Quiles, Zara Ruiz (eds.), *Acervo Mexicano. Legado de Culturas* (Sevilla: Universidad Pablo de Olavide-Benemérita Universidad Autónoma de Puebla, 2017), 419, <https://rio.upo.es/rest/api/core/bitstreams/ec982b4b-21b2-465e-b6b1-65fbb390b203/content>, last accessed January 2024.

⁵¹

Nevertheless, it must also be remembered that in 1958 Mexico tried to establish itself as seat of a continental art reunion upon organising the *First Interamerican Biennial of Painting and Engraving* in Mexico City. Although the project only made it as far as a second iteration in 1960, it demonstrated the interest to foment more exhibition venues in Latin America. One example of this was the foundation of the São Paulo Biennial in 1951. This was a cultural event that acquired continental importance, and which persists to the present day. See *Memorias de Labores: Instituto Nacional de Bellas Artes: 1954-1958* (México: INBA, 1958). Miguel Álvarez Acosta, "Discurso pronunciado por el señor licenciado Don Miguel Álvarez Acosta: con motivo de la Primera Bienal Interamericana de Pintura y Grabado, en el Museo Nacional de Artes Plásticas el 6 de junio de 1958", www.icaadocs.mfah.org/s/es/item/823576#?c=&m=&s=&cv=&xywh=-1116%2C0%2C3930%2C2199.html, last accessed May 2024.

fig. 9
Catalogue's cover of Mexico's Pavilion, 1958. *XXIX Bienal de Venecia, Italia, 1958. Pintura Mexicana Contemporánea*, Instituto Nacional de Bellas Artes. Photo: Amelia Chávez Santiago.



The head of DAP, Miguel Salas Anzures,⁵² would be the national pavilion's commissioner. Owing to the constant increase in participating countries and the lack of pavilions at the Giardini, Mexico's exhibition was placed in the central building. Mexico's commissioner did not travel to Venice; instead he sent a collective sampling of Figurative and Semifigurative painters, second generation artists from the Postrevolutionary Artistic Movement: Carlos Orozco Romero (1896-1984), Jorge González Camarena (1908-1980), Raúl Anguiano (1915-2006), Manuel Rodríguez Lozano (1896-1971), Guillermo Meza Álvarez (1917-1997), and Ricardo Martínez de Hoyos (1918-2009). Three paintings per artist were selected, for a total of eighteen works. Eleven were lent by the artists themselves, five came from private collections, and one, *La Espina* (The Thorne, 1952) by Raúl Anguiano, was from the MNAP collection.

Most of the pieces were painted in the 1950s, except for the three works by Manuel Rodríguez Lozano that were created in the first half of the 1940s. Although there is no photographic record of Mexico's 1958 Pavilion, INBAL published the catalogue of Mexico's participation, titled *XXIX Venice Biennale, Italy. Contemporary Mexican Painting* [fig. 9].

During the five previous biennials, from 1948 to 1956, a wide review of international currents in the artworld had been made. These began in the 20th century with well-deserved recognition of the main figures in modern art. From there on, the Biennale Organising Committee began contemporary art's diffusion, shaping curatorial concepts around the vision set by the Biennale's main curator.⁵³

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Miguel Salas Anzures (Mexico, 1911-1966) graduated from School of Teachers in 1932, where he had functioned as director, inspector or supervisor in different Republic of Mexico states. In the '40s he undertook exchanges with the painters Fernando Gamboa and Rosendo Soto. On January 16, 1950, he began work as DAP's secretary. With the beginning of the Adolfo Ruiz Cortines's government (1952-1958), the position as head of DAP was taken by Víctor M. Reyes, with Miguel Salas Anzures as Secretary. Reyes renounced his position at end of 1957, and for that reason it was occupied by Salas Anzures. He resigned from INBAL fully in March, 1961.

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Alan Bowness, "The 1958 Biennale", in *The Burlington Magazine* 100, no. 669 (December, 1958), 435-436, [jstor.org/stable/872598.html](https://www.jstor.org/stable/872598.html), last accessed May 2024.

Contrary to the call for younger artists exhibiting works in Informalism, present in various national pavilions at the Venice Biennale 1958,⁵⁴ the six painters that exhibited in Mexico's Pavilion represented the Post-revolutionary Artistic Movement's first and second generations. These artists, known for their figurative works, were all between forty and sixty years of age. None represented the "local young artist"⁵⁵ Biennale President Giovanni Ponti requested in a letter to Mario Garza Ramos, consul at the Mexican embassy in Italy. What Mexico instead sent to the 1958 Biennale only signalled the continuity of support to a visual arts production which wished to perpetuate itself in spite of having arisen three decades back. INBAL's administrations, then, continued to consider a wide group of figurative artists of different ages as makers of "young art".⁵⁶

Mexican art critic José Miguel García Ascot, sharply criticised the pavilion's content, describing it as "the most deplorable collection of used formulae, of grandiloquent pictoric phrases filled with conventionalism, pomposity and with exhaustion".⁵⁷ For García Ascot, the young artists that had to present themselves at the Biennale corresponded to the group known as the *Generación de la Ruptura* (Generation of the Rupture) or more aptly, *Los Independientes* (The Independents) - a group of young artists that emerged in the 1950s. The group included Juan Soriano (1920-2006), José Luis Cuevas (1931-2017), Lilia Carrillo (1930-1974), Pedro Coronel (1922-1985), Fernando García Ponce (1933-1987), Manuel Felguérez (1928-2020), Kiyoshi Takashashi (1925-1996), Alberto Gironella (1929-1999), Jorge Dubón (1938-2004), and Vlady (1920-2005), among others. *Los Independientes* not only had heterogeneous ways of expressing plastic arts, techniques, subjects and forms, they also distanced themselves from the cultural policies set by the Mexican government, refusing state sponsorship, which often favoured only a select few.⁵⁸

Conclusion

The 1950 pavilion had the task of promoting Modern Mexican art, generating high expectations and thus leaving Europe's public eager for more. However, from this promising beginning, the history of Mexico's Pavilion began to falter, culminating in the less successful 1958 presentation. This, however, did not deter Mexico from renouncing to exhibitions in Europe and other continents. Since 1952 Mexico's cultural policies were focused towards considering international panoramic exhibitions as diplomatic means, arenas for presenting business cards and bridges of interchange with the world. Exhibitions were also the ideal medium for the promotion of tourism and establishing economic links.

54

Nancy Jachec, "Anticommunism at home, Europeanism abroad: Italian Cultural Policy at the Venice Biennale, 1948-1958".

55

The letter read: "Nevertheless, I believe it isn't useless to point out that from now on, Italy and other participating countries at the Biennale shall present works of young artists with special breadth. Therefore, we would be grateful if the commissioner holds it convenient, to show at Mexico's hall some local young artist". Letter of Giovanni Ponti to Mario Garza Ramos, March 27, 1958. ASAC, 1958: Paesi - Messico.

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On June 6, 1958, INBAL's director, Miguel Álvarez Acosta, indicated Mexico's active international participation: "Mexico has just participated with its juvenile art in the Bordeaux exhibition and is represented at the Venice Biennale". Miguel Álvarez Acosta, "Discurso pronunciado por el señor licenciado Don Miguel Álvarez Acosta: con motivo de la Primera Bienal Interamericana de Pintura y Grabado, en el Museo Nacional de Artes Plásticas el 6 de junio de 1958" (1958), 11, www.icaadocs.mfah.org/s/es/item/823576#?c=&m=&s=&cv=&xywh=-1116%2C0%2C3930%2C2199.html, last accessed June 2024.

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José Miguel García Ascot, "El INBA y la Bienal de Venecia ante un fracaso", *México en la Cultura*, (1958). Translation by the author, www.icaadocs.mfah.org/s/es/item/786688#?c=&m=&s=&cv=&xywh=-1673%2C0%2C5895%2C3299.html, last accessed May 2024.

58

Manuel Felguérez, *La Ruptura 1935-1955*, (1988), www.icaa.mfah.org/s/es/item/788048#?c=&m=&s=&cv=&xywh=-118%2C1164%2C2947%2C1649.html, last accessed April 2024.

Following Mexico's initial participation, the Biennale's Organising Committee was optimistic that it could retain Mexico's constant participation, as had been facilitated through Fernando Gamboa's effective communication. Among these was Rodolfo Pallucchini, with whom he had a more cordial rapprochement during the organisation of the first two pavilions. It was also hoped that Mexico would perceive the enthusiasm that their national plastic arts had generated in the international reunion. The Organising Committee even offered Mexico a plot of land in the Giardini situated between Switzerland and the Union of Soviet Social Republics, in order to build its pavilion and thus ensure the presentation of future artistic generations. However, Mexico's government neither purchased the plot nor initiated pavilion construction, resulting in Venezuela's acquisition of the land in 1956. This missed opportunity reflected the lack of a long term cultural policy on behalf of Mexico's government, and definitively lost the opportunity to establish a constant and well situated place at the Giardini.

Mexico's Pavilion at the Venice Biennale of 1958 reflects the intention on behalf of the country's cultural administration to perpetuate, at both national and international levels, artists and their works representative of the Postrevolutionary Artistic Movement. Mexico's last participation at the Biennale showed the crisis of the Mexican cultural administration, as it was a watershed between nationalist discourse and non-Figurative painters that began their career in the 1950s. Mexico's selection of works appeared anachronistic, standing apart from the more contemporary artistic proposals on display. As a result, it struggled to capture the attention of audiences and critics, distancing itself also from recognition given by prize and distinctions to the artists, and in turn to their countries. From 1958 onward, the Mexican government made no sustained commitment to participating with a national pavilion. Nevertheless, in 1968, Rufino Tamayo was honoured with a retrospective exhibition at the Biennale's Central Pavilion, celebrating his 50-year career in a display curated by Fernando Gamboa.

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	Echoes From Blinking in the Darkness to the World Art Stage: Turkey's Participation in the Venice Biennale on (In)Visibility and Hegemony Discourse¹ Esra Yıldız Abstract The 1950s were important for the visibility of modern Turkish art and Turkey's first participations in international biennials such as Venice, São Paolo, and Paris. Turkey first participated in the Venice Biennale in 1956, then again in 1958 and 1962, after which it did not return for various reasons until 1990. Until the 1990s, participation at Venice and other international biennials was mainly organised through the initiations of the Academy of Fine Arts in Istanbul, alongside the government's inadequate support through related ministries and foreign embassies. After 1990, the responsibility for participation in the Venice Biennale was undertaken first by curator Beral Madra and then, starting from 2007, the Istanbul Foundation for Culture and Arts (IKSV), with the support of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the Ministry of Culture and Tourism, and private sponsorships. Following a historical narrative, this article focuses on Turkey's representation in the Venice Biennale from 1956 to 2024; how participation was realised through the state's institutions, individuals, and IKSV; how the local and global cultural and political atmosphere influenced participation; and how Turkey's participation evolved from (in)visibility to hegemony. All of the above are discussed through primary sources such as archival documents, exhibition catalogues and the statements of artists and curators. The article will shed light on the history of Turkey's participation in the Venice Biennale, which has been little discussed in the writings of art history. Keywords Venice Biennale, Contemporary art, Turkey at the Venice Biennale, Academy of Fine Arts, IKSV		
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From Blinking in the Darkness to the World Art Stage: Turkey's Participation in the Venice Biennale on (In)Visibility and Hegemony Discourse¹

Esra Yıldız

Introduction

Artist and professor at the Academy of Fine Arts Nurullah Berk, who devoted great effort to the visibility of Turkish art, starting from the exhibitions held in Europe in the 1940s and 1950s to the representation of Turkey in the Paris Biennial as a *commissaire*,² went to Venice with the artist Sabri Berkel in 1953. In an article written after the trip, he underlined, and not for the first time, that the government did not give adequate importance or financial support to art and culture, and these were important reasons for Turkey's invisibility in international biennials. Beyond financial and organisational difficulties, the government's indifference and the lack of a consistent perspective and policy on art and culture prevented Turkey's regular participation in biennials at the national level for a long time. Berk added:

For how many years have we forgotten our participation in the Biennale exhibition held in Venice every two years. The time comes, there is no money, the budget has not been allocated, the painters cannot get along, we miss this beautiful opportunity due to lack of organisation, and we stop. The Biennale exhibitions are put on in a place with large parks, half an hour from Venice. All states besides Turkey built pavilions of various sizes here because there is no other community in the world that does not give importance to the arts and its own art. Even the states that we deem small and consider inferior, built small pavilions in proportion to their financial means, and they show the works of their painters and sculptors.

1

This article relies on my ongoing research and publications on Turkey's participation in international biennials. I first discovered archival documents about Turkey's participation in the Venice Biennale in November 2016 during my visit to the ASAC Archive, the São Paulo Biennial papers in the Bienal de São Paulo Fundação Bienal de São Paulo/Arquivo Histórico Wanda Svevo, São Paulo in early 2017. All these papers shed light on the undiscovered and unwritten history of Turkey's participation in international biennials, the early history of which I was the first to document.

2

Commissaire (commissioner) is a French word used until the 1980s to identify the institution's head curators.

We contacted the representatives of the Biennale and showed them photographs of Turkish painters' artworks. They were amazed. "Since you have such advanced art, why don't you participate?" they said. The answer to this should have been: "Because we, as a state, are such a poor country that we cannot supply the two thousand liras needed to load a few chests of paintings and sculptures from Istanbul onto the Barletta ferry to send them to Venice!"³

Considering biennials' impact on contemporary art and their position as a driving force for its visibility in the era of globalisation, how might the country's art be promoted on an international platform such as the Venice Biennale, and become a part of the artworld at large? How did Turkey's presence on international platforms affect its art in a period when contemporary art was reshaped after the Second World War? How did the government and actors from the private sector regulate national participation? Seeking answers to these questions and following a historical narrative, this article focuses on Turkey's representation at the Venice Biennale from 1956 to 2024 and presents a discourse on Turkey's position from (in)visibility to hegemony, using primary sources such as archival documents, exhibition catalogues and the statements of artists and curators.

Participation in the Venice Biennale in the 1950s⁴ and 1960s through the Academy of Fine Arts

Before becoming a focus of attention in art and culture through the Istanbul Biennial, Turkey was represented in international biennials and exhibitions by artists selected by the Academy of Fine Arts in Istanbul. Starting in the 1950s, biennials and art festivals played an important role in the regeneration of Europe and the reconciliation of countries affected by the war. After the end of the Second World War, the new peacetime international order favoured presenting many artists from various countries to show a multinational approach to exhibition-making. There was a parallel increase in participation from different countries, particularly in the Venice Biennale. As art historian and curator Lawrence Alloway stated, the number of participating countries increased to an average of thirty between 1948 and 1966.⁵ The number of biennials held in different cities worldwide also increased; it was no longer just the Venice Biennale. Other events, especially "Southern Biennials" held on different continents, such as the São Paulo (1951), Alexandria (1955), and Tehran (1958) biennials, presented an alternative to the art history previously written through the historical narratives of the North/West. Thus, biennials created novel perspectives on art. This evolved into a new stage and structure, contributing to a new art historiography.

In this new atmosphere, Turkish artist Abidin Dino took part in the Venice Biennale for the first time in 1952, but did not represent Turkey per se. As a member of the Turkish Communist Party, Abidin Dino was exiled to Adana due to his political ideas in the 1940s, and his passport was confiscated. After this ban was lifted, he went abroad and was invited to the 26th Venice Biennale (1952) with his work *Frutta* (Fruit). Turkey did not participate in 27th Venice Biennale (1954) for economic and administrative reasons. Luca Pietromarchi, the Italian Ambassador to Ankara, wrote in a letter to Giovanni Ponti that the reasons for Turkey's absence in the Biennale were not only economic, but also because it feared both that Turkish

3

Nurullah Berk, "Seyahat Notları: Adriyatığın İncisi", *Yeditepe*, no. 35 (April 15, 1953): 2.

4

The section on the participation of Turkey in the Venice Biennale before 1990 is based on my article; Esra Yıldız, "Turkey's Participation in International Biennials in the 1950s", *Art in Translation* 14, no. 3 (2022): 297-337, doi: 10.1080/17561310.2022.2150415.

5

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

works would be unable to match those from abroad, particularly in comparison with the West.⁶ The prejudice expressed by this bureaucrat from the Italian government shows that he did not consider Turkey to be in the same league as other producers of modern art. However, when Turkey first participated in the Biennale in 1956, Secretary General Rodolfo Pallucchini praised Turkey's avant-garde perspective.⁷ This would later open discussions about whether the art of non-Western countries can be considered in the context of modernism and other discourses in contemporary art during the post-1990s era of globalisation.⁸

Turkey began to be invited to the Venice Biennale from 1948 onwards but was unable to participate until 1956 for various administrative and economic reasons. Between 1948 and 1956, invitation letters were sent to Turkey for each iteration. In 1948, Turkey could not participate in the Venice Biennale for economic reasons.⁹ Similarly, Turkey had been invited to the São Paulo Biennial since 1953 but was only able to participate for the first time in 1957, when the 4th Biennial was held, for administrative reasons, as stated in the letters.¹⁰ The participation of Turkish artists and the awards gained in the 1950s and 1960s (such as Kuzgun Acar winning the great award at the 1961 Paris Biennial)¹¹ showed that Turkey was already acknowledged as a force in the international art and cultural scene, and suggests the universal appeal of these artists' works.

As part of Turkey's process of integration into Western art, and indicative of its increasing authority in world art, abstract art had become an important tendency in the country in parallel with its dominance at the Venice Biennale in the 1950s. By participating in important exhibitions and establishing a presence in the French art scene, artists such as Nejad Devrim,¹² who, since the end of the 1940s, had connections with the Paris avant-garde scene, became the cornerstones of the opening up of Turkish art at the global level. Known as the *École de Paris* artists, they also gave Turkish art international visibility,¹³ and Turkey would further cement its position before the period of the biennials.

Besides the success of Turkish artists living in Europe, conferences and meetings provided an important opportunity to promote Turkish art through international cultural relations. During the 6th International Association of Art Critics (AICA) Congress, art critic Zahir Güvemli sent a series of articles by Turkish art critics to the President of Naples Journalists, Adriano Falvo, who agreed to publish them in Italy. He also underlined the importance of foreign cultural centres in promoting both local arts and mutual cultural relations, adding that he had encountered Marinetti's works in 1936 thanks to the Istanbul Casa d'Italia.¹⁴ By the late 1940s and 1950s, Turkey had already joined many international political and cultural organisations, becoming a member of UNESCO in 1946, NATO in 1952

6

Luca Pietromarchi letter to Giovanni Ponti", December 3, 1953, in *La Biennale, L'Archivio Storico delle Arti Contemporanee* (hereafter ASAC), *Arti Visive*.

7

Rodolfo Pallucchini, 'Introduzione', in *La Biennale di Venezia, Catalogo della XXVIII Biennale di Venezia* exh. cat. (Venezia: Stamperia di Venezia, 1956), xxx.

8

This discussion was also highlighted in the 60th Venice Biennale (2024), which had a high number of non-Western artists and was titled *Stranieri Ovunque – Foreigners Everywhere*.

9

Giovanni Ponti letter to Feridun Cemal Erkin, April 9, 1948, in *La Biennale, ASAC, Arti Visive*.

10

For instance, it is stated in a letter dated August 4, 1954 that Turkey would not participate in the Biennial for administrative reasons (por motivos ordem administrativa). Theodemiro Tostes letter to Arturo Profili", August 4, 1954, in *The Arquivos Históricos de Arte Contemporânea, São Paulo*.

11

Murat Ural, *Kuzgun Acar* (Istanbul: Millî Reasürans Art Gallery, 1997).

12

The son of Fahrelnissa Zeid, the Turkish-born, Paris-based artist Nejad Devrim exhibited his paintings in prestigious Parisian art galleries starting from the late 1940s, but during his lifetime he was never invited to a biennial.

13

Ali Artun, *Modernizm Kavramı ve Türkiye'de Modernist Sanatın Doğuşu* (Istanbul: İletişim, 2021).

14

Zahir Güvemli, "Dolayısıyla III", *Varlık* 115, no. 470 (January 1958): 11.

and AICA in 1953. The 6th AICA meeting was held in Istanbul in 1954, providing Western intellectuals an important opportunity to experience Turkish art practices. Important art and cultural critics such as Lionello Venturi, Paul Fierens, and Herbert Read were also jury members of the Business and Employment (1954) exhibition competition organised by Yapı Kredi Bank.

The regeneration of relationships between Turkey and Italy also impacted culture. After World War II, the first cultural agreement between Italy and Turkey was signed on July 17, 1951.¹⁵ Before Turkey's first participation in the Venice Biennale in 1956, an Italian art exhibition, which visited various countries, including Istanbul, was organised to promote a new image of Italy through art and culture. In the post-war period, a new era of Turkish-Italian relations began on March 24, 1950, when the Turkish-Italian Friendship, Reconciliation and Judicial Leveling Treaty was signed in Rome. An example of good relations between the two countries, the exhibition *Art Italienne d'Aujourd'hui* (Italian Art Today, April 26-May 6, 1953), was opened in 1953 at Dolmabahçe Palace. It exemplified the expansionist approach of the Venice Biennale in bringing Italian art to different countries, at a time when Turkey and some other countries did not participate in biennials. Although Turkey was not a Biennale participant at the time, Istanbul residents showed a great interest in art that had not previously been seen, as about a thousand people visited the exhibition each day.¹⁶ Giovanni Ponti stated that the exhibition, which featured a broad range of Italian artworks, from Carlo Carrà to Arturo Tosi, was a message of friendship sent by the new Italian democracy to the Turkish people.¹⁷ It was clear that through this exhibition Italian art professionals were trying to turn a new page as a response to Turkey's inability to participate in the Venice Biennale. Shortly after this exhibition, in the new multicultural atmosphere, Turkey was amongst the thirty-four participating countries in the 28th Venice Biennale (1956).

fig. 1
Abidin Dino, *Fruit* (Frutta),
Photo: Michele Como
(Laboratorio Fotografico
Industriale), 26th Venice
Biennale
© ASAC Archivio Storico delle
Arti Contemporanee, Venice



15

Mevlut Çelebi, "Atatürk Dönemi Ve Sonrasında Türkiye-İtalya İlişkilerini Etkileyen Faktörler", *Atatürk Araştırma Merkezi Dergisi*, no. 31 (2015): 69-92.

16

"Bugünkü İtalyan Sanatı", *Yeditepe*, no. 37 (May 15, 1953): 1, 8.

17

Giovanni Ponti, "Preface", in *Art Italien d'aujourd'hui: April 26 - May 16 1953*, exh. cat. (Istanbul: Venice: Fantoni, 1953).

fig. 2
Turkey Pavilion at the 28th
Venice Biennale (1956)
© ASAC Archivio Storico delle
Arti Contemporanee, Venice



fig. 3
Turkey Pavilion at the 28th
Venice Biennale (1956)
© ASAC Archivio Storico delle
Arti Contemporanee, Venice



fig. 4
Turkey Pavilion at the 28th
Venice Biennale (1956)
© ASAC Archivio Storico delle
Arti Contemporanee, Venice



After the establishment of the Turkish Republic in 1923, art and culture were seen as important tools for society's education and attaining Western and European ideals. The Republican People's Party (CHP) supported art and culture, sending artists abroad for education as well as inviting foreign educators to Turkish universities. In the 1950s, when the biennial-style exhibition gained importance, Turkey participated in the 1st Ljubljana Graphic Arts Biennale (1955), the 28th (1956) and the 29th (1958) Venice Biennials, the 4th São Paulo Biennale (1957), the 4th (1956) and the 5th (1958) International Biennials of Contemporary Color Lithography and the 1st Paris Biennale (1959). These invitations were extended to Turkey during the governance of the Democrat Party (DP), a conservative, pro-nationalist and pro-American party.

During the DP governance, which lasted until May 27, 1960, the cultural and social fields experienced a significantly different and openly hostile political atmosphere, where leftist and communist artists and intellectuals were targeted. Nazım Hikmet, for example, was stripped of his Turkish citizenship by the DP government in 1951. Most of the members of the Turkish Communist Party were arrested, including Yaşar Kemal, Sadun Aren, and Behice Boran. Institutions and organisations involved in culture and art on wider social platforms were prevented from carrying out activities. Community Centres and Village Institutes were also shut down in 1954 as they were seen as pro-communist organisations.

In these years, the DP also interfered in the participation of left-wing artists in international exhibitions. Tevfik İleri, then-Minister of National Education, prevented Nuri İyem's paintings from being shipped to Brazil for the São Paulo Biennial (1957). Nuri İyem, who was arrested during World War II for holding communist ideals and opposing fascism, was followed by the police after his exhibitions and lectures. After İleri prevented his works from reaching the São Paulo Biennial, İyem said, "he w[ould] not participate in international exhibitions again".¹⁸ According to Derek Patmore, a similar case involved İbrahim Balaban, who learned to paint from Nazım Hikmet and was prevented from exhibiting at the 11th Edinburgh Festival due to pressure from the state.¹⁹ More generally, the government attempted to censor left-wing artists in this Cold War atmosphere of suspicion.

After the World War II, Giovanni Ponti aimed to bring a new political neutrality to the Biennale in the context of the Cold War.²⁰ The year 1958 is considered a turning point in the history of the Venice Biennale and modern art more broadly, with abstract trends featuring both in the national sections and international pavilions.²¹ The Biennale showed abstract and neo-realistic trends in the Italian art section between 1948 and 1956, while modernism was emphasised in international pavilions.²² The works from Turkey exhibited in the 1956 and 1958 Venice Biennale reflected the trends of Italian cultural policy. Abstract and figurative

18

Nuri İyem letter to the Directorate of São Paulo Biennial, July 15, 1957, in The Arquivos Históricos de Arte Contemporânea, São Paulo.

19

Clifford Endres, "Edouard Roditi and the Istanbul Avant-Garde", *Texas Studies in Literature and Language*, no. 4 (Winter 2012): 471-493.

20

Stefano Collicelli Cagol and Vittoria Martini, "The Venice Biennale at its Turning Points: 1948 and the Aftermath of 1968", in Noemi de Haro García, Patricia Mayayo, Jesús Carrillo (eds.), *Making Art History in Europe After 1945* (London: Routledge, 2020), 84.

21

Nancy Jachec, "Anti-Communism at Home, Europeanism Abroad: Italian Cultural Policy at the Venice Biennale, 1948-1958", *Contemporary European History* 14 (May 2005): 193, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0960777305002316>.

22

Nancy Jachec, "Venice Biennale".

works from Turkey were equally represented in the 28th Venice Biennale (1956).²³ Abstract art was a dominant trend at the 29th Biennale and although figurative and realistic works were also included (1958)²⁴ in Turkey's section, abstract and abstractionist works dominated. Art critic John Berger, for one, found non-Western participants to be more interesting during the 28th Venice Biennale (1958).²⁵ He thought that the United Arab Republic Pavilion²⁶ at the 28th Venice Biennale was the most positive and lively pavilion of the event, in contrast with the exhausted, finished, academic art of the West.²⁷ The abstract works of other Non-Western countries also grabbed the attention of Western art critics.

Sabri Berkel curated Turkey's section in the 31st Venice Biennale (1962), selecting the art of thirteen artists to display amongst the thirty-three participating countries. Abstraction still dominated the exhibition, and French painter Alfred Manessier received the grand prize. This edition presented Turkish artists from both old and new generations, with predominantly abstract paintings. The 1962 Biennale also marked the first time that a Turkish woman artist—Tülay Tura, whose work would also be represented in the 2nd Paris Biennial (1961)—would participate in the Venice Biennale.²⁸ In the first three iterations, artists who worked for the event, such as Sabri Berkel and Nurullah Berk, were also represented by one or more artworks as participatory artists.

After Turkey's first participation in 1956, Sabri Berkel and Nijad Sirel hoped that Turkey would better prepare for the next Venice Biennale, and they expressed their wishes to establish an independent Turkish Pavilion for this purpose.²⁹ Since Turkey did not have a country pavilion in the Venice Biennale in those years, its artworks were shown alongside other countries without a pavilion in the Giardini, the main exhibition area of the Biennale. At the 28th Venice Biennale (1956), Turkey was in the Palazzo Centrale amongst the pavilions of countries such as India, Sri Lanka, and Vietnam. At the 29th Venice Biennale (1958), the Turkish Pavilion was surrounded by the Israel, United States of America, Czechoslovakia, and France Pavilions, next to the venues where artists from Tunisia and Malta were

23

Artworks exhibited at the 28th Venice Biennale (1956): Paintings; Ahmet Hakkı Anlı, *Composizione* (1956); Nurullah Berk, *L'uomo con il Narghilé* (1954), *Donna Che Cuce* (1956); Sabri Berkel, *Preoccupazione* (1955), *Serenità* (1956); Cemal Bingöl, *Donna che tesse* (1956); Ali Avni Çelebi, *Parrucchiere* (1937); Cevat Dereli, *Il raccolto* (1955); Halil Dikmen, *Paesaggio* (1945); Hamit Görele, *Paesaggio del Mar Nero* (1941); Neşet Günel, *Composizione con tre figure* (1951); Nuri İyem, *Natura morta* (1956); Zeki Faik İzer, *Composizione: la musica* (1947); Ercüment Kalmık, *La costa* (1956); Arif Kaptan, *Composizione* (1955); Cemal Tollu, *Le capre* (1955), *La terra* (1956); Salih Urallı, *La donna con la bicicletta* (1956); Eşref Üren, *Paesaggio d'Ankara* (1945); Turgut Zaim, *Le Tessitrici* (1937), *Paesaggio d'Ankara* (1945). Sculptures; Kuzgun Acar, *Scultura* (1956); Hadi Bara, *Scultura* (1954), *Scultura* (1955); Şadi Çalık, *Variazioni Sui Triangoli* (1954); İlhan Koman, *Scultura* (1954), *Scultura* (1956); Zühtü Müridoğlu, *Testa* (1937), *Torso* (1953), *Figura* (1954); Nijad Sirel, *Il poeta Abdülhak Hamit* (1929). *La Biennale di Venezia, Catalogo della XXVIII Biennale di Venezia*, exh. cat. (Venezia: Stamperia di Venezia, 1956), 268-272. The commissaire of Turkey's section at the Biennale was Sabri Berkel.

24

Artworks exhibited at the 29th Venice Biennale (1958): Paintings; Erdal Alantar, *Composizione* (1956), *L'oca* (1956), *Composizione* (1957); Nurullah Berk, *L'uomo con narghirle (I Versione)* (1955), *L'uomo con Narghirle (II Versione)* (1956), *Ricamatrice* (1955); Sabri Berkel, *Composizione* (1957), *Figura* (1957), *Grafia* (1957), *Grafia* (1957), *Motivo* (1957); Şadan Bezeyiş, *Adapazarı* (1926), *Ritratto* (1957), *La Città: Istanbul* (1957), *Ritratto e Città* (1958), *Composizione* (1958); Cemal Tollu, *Il Frumento* (1956), *Dervisci, Tornitori* (1958), *Due Contadine* (1958); Turgut Zaim, *Antico Teatro all'aperto* (1955); *Contadine Yörük* (1957). Sculptures; Hadi Bara, *Scultura* (1956), *Scultura* (1956); Şadi Çalık, *Scultura* (1956); İlhan Koman, *Scultura* (1955), *Scultura: Piani* (1955), *Ritmo* (1957). The commissaire of Turkey's section at the Biennale was Nijad Sirel. *La Biennale di Venezia, Catalogo della XXIX Biennale di Venezia*, exh. cat. (Venezia: Stamperia di Venezia, 1958), 361-363.

25

John Berger, "The Biennale", in *Landscapes: John Berger on Art* (London: Verso, 2016), 155.

26

A short-lived (1958-1971) state formed by the union of Syria and Egypt.

27

Berger, "The Biennale", 158.

28

The number of female artists participating in the Biennial, which was historically very low in the selections made by male professors from the Academy, has increased over the years.

29

Sabri Berkel and Nijad Sirel letter to Massimo Alesi, November 1956, in *La Biennale, ASAC, Arti Visive*.

exhibited. In the 31st Biennale, it was surrounded by countries such as India, Ireland, Brazil and, Argentina. The economic and political placement of nations, particularly their status as first and third-world, or developed and developing countries, are important factors in the Biennale's imaginary map.

Catalogue texts are also important in understanding how Turkey presented itself. In the 28th Venice Biennale (1956) catalogue article for Turkey's section, Sabri Berkel mentioned two tendencies in Turkish art: "one works with a desire for inspiration by connecting national sources to the Western spirit, and the other is eager to transcend the local atmosphere by reconnecting to a vision with a freer character".³⁰ In his article for the 29th Venice Biennale (1958) catalogue, Turkey section commissioner and Director of the Academy of Fine Arts Nijad Sirel stated that because Turkey was a bridge between Eastern and Western civilisations based on both its ethnic and geographical structures, it would become a synthesis and meeting point of East and West in the future.³¹ For its participation in 1962, Sabri Berkel outlined the different tendencies in Turkish art; combining ancient aesthetics with modern art and trying to escape tradition to use new forms.³² This iteration presented artworks "different in form but close to each other in spirit", from contemporary Turkey. Local-national discourse and being a part of Western art without losing its unique spirit in art were among the main discussions during these years at the Academy.³³

fig. 5
Turkey Pavilion at the 28th
Venice Biennale (1956)
© ASAC Archivio Storico delle
Arti Contemporanee, Venice



³⁰
Sabri Berkel, "Turchia," in 28. *La Biennale di Venezia*, exh. cat. (Venice: Stamperia di Venezia, 1956), 268.

³¹
Nijad Sirel, "Turchia," in 29. *La Biennale di Venezia*, exh. cat. (Venice: Stamperia di Venezia, 1958), 364.

³²
Sabri Berkel, "Turchia," in 31. *La Biennale di Venezia*, exh. cat. (Venice: Stamperia di Venezia, 1962), 119.

³³
Esra Yıldız, "Ulusalılık ve Evrensellik Tartışmaları Bağlamında Türkiye'nin Uluslararası Sergilerde ve Bienallerde Temsili (1950-1970)", *Yedi*, no. 27 (2022): 95-111, doi: <https://doi.org/10.17484/yedi.938194>.

fig. 6
Palazzo Centrale exhibition
plan (Turkey's space: 55), La
Biennale di Venezia, Catalogo
della XXVIII Biennale di Venezia,
Venezia: Stamperia di Venezia,
1956



The Long Interval: The Absence until 1990

After Turkey participated in the Venice Biennale in 1962, Sabri Berkel, who had organized Turkey's previous participations in the Biennale, tried to initiate another one for the 33rd Biennale (1966),³⁴ but did not succeed. Although Turkey received an invitation letter to the event and despite Berkel's efforts, lack of support from state institutions prevented Turkey's participation until 1990. The interval spanning nearly thirty years can be interpreted in various ways, as archival documents do not provide enough solid information about the non-participation of Turkey during this period.

Undoubtedly, Turkey's introversion was partly due to the political events and collective trauma experienced by artists and civil society alike as a result of the military coups of March 12, 1971, and, especially September 12, 1980, which interrupted not only social but also art and cultural life. They affected Turkey's cultural relationships on an international scale, particularly in the first few years following the coups. After the 1960s, many important factors affected Turkey's participation at Venice and other prominent biennials until the 1990s. These factors include delays (in the form of late replies to invitation letters), economic factors, the fact that Turkey's decisions through Academy professors regarding representation and selection of artists for biennials, including the Venice Biennale, did not parallel global artistic trends, and the fact that politically and socially engaged artworks were not given a prominent space in educational institutions in the 1960s and 1970s. Concerning the selection criteria for artists to participate in biennials, and artist and professor at the Academy of Fine Arts, Şükrü Aysan, stated that at some point, "the artists selected remain somewhat marginal in the national context", particularly in the Paris Biennial participations organised by Nurullah Berk, the Academy, and national juries.³⁵ During these years, artists also criticised the selections of representatives of the Academy and the ministries. Adnan Turani appreciated the quality of artworks exhibited at the Bangladesh International Dhaka Biennial, where he was invited as a jury member, but he criticised the selections of the Ministry of Culture for Turkey's participation, finding them controversial. Indeed, he claimed that:

It would be better if the state gave weight to those who really understand the selection process, because if we (as a country) do not, we will not be invited because weak artworks are being sent. This is

³⁴

Sabri Berkel letter to Mario Marazzan, December 7, 1965, in *La Biennale*, ASAC, Arti Visive.

³⁵

Şükrü Aysan, *Akademi'ye Tanıklık I: Güzel Sanatlar Akademisi'ne bakışlar: Resim ve Heykel*, edited by Ahmet Öner Gezgini (İstanbul: Bağlam Yayınları, 2003), 289.

my firm conviction because you cannot interpret why we were not invited to the previous Biennale in any other way.³⁶

Political artworks, meanwhile, were under the firm control of the government. For example, the negatives of Director Yılmaz Güney's film *Yol*, co-directed by Şerif Gören, which shared the grand prize at the Cannes Film Festival (1982) with Costa Gavras' film *Lost*, had been smuggled abroad. Yılmaz Güney wrote the script while in prison during the September 12 military coup. Films about the political atmosphere of the period, such as Erden Kıral's *A Season in Hakkari* (1983), which won the Silver Bear Award at Berlin Film Festival, were banned in Turkey. Artist Gülsün Karamustafa, who was banned from going abroad after the March 12 military coup, said that as a politically engaged artist who studied at the Academy between 1963 and 1969, being political had long been seen as the enemy of art in Turkey.³⁷ After September 12, Nil Yalter, who participated in the 3rd Paris Biennial (1963) by the invitation of Nurullah Berk, and had lived in Paris since 1965 as a politically active artist in France during the 1970s and 1980s, could not return to Turkey until the 1990s. Important political artworks produced in the 1970s and 1980s could be shown at international cultural and art events without the support of the state.

While political art was rising in the world, one questions what kind of difference could have been achieved in terms of art and artists, had contemporary art been more open about resistance and solidarity with other countries and had the political works produced in the 1970s and 1980s in Turkey been exhibited at the biennials.

Another example of the cutting of ties with the art world can be given. Curator and art historian Dieter Ronte organised his first exhibition on Turkish art, 300 Jahre (300 Years), at the Vienna Contemporary Arts Museum in 1982, on the occasion of the 300th anniversary of the Turks' siege of Vienna. But, as a result of the intervention and pressure of the Turkish state, he was unable to invite artists from Turkey, but only Turkish artists from the diaspora living in Germany and France.³⁸

The selection criteria of state institutions were controversial, and the artists chosen by the Academy for international events did not keep up with contemporary trends, remaining stagnant in relation to global cultural and artistic developments. Despite the limited participation of Turkey in international biennials in the 1980s, artists continued to produce work in the country, and the 1980s was a productive period for contemporary art despite the violent atmosphere of the September 12, 1980 military coup and difficult political conditions. Particularly between 1980 and 1990, Turkey's participation in biennials was focused on the South, including the Alexandria Biennial and the India Triennial, as well as certain European Biennials, such as the Ljubljana Graphic Arts Biennial.

The lack of participation in biennials can be considered together with the social and political developments of the period, alongside a decrease in the economic support of the state, and the inadequacy and disruption of the Academy's overseas organisation. For example, in 1968, as riots started in Paris and spread to different countries, art and cinema looked to the streets and their actions. New Wave Filmmakers protested the Cannes Film Festival, and the venue of the 1968 Milan Triennale was occupied by students and artists. In the same year, young people and workers were also protesting the Venice Biennale, and Turkey could not participate due to the politically active students, including those of the Academy and Istanbul University, in 1968.³⁹ Similar to the biennials held in the shadow of social uprisings in Turkey and the rest of the world, the aesthetics of the political and the

36

Adnan Turani, "Plastik Sanatlar", *Varlık Yıllığı* 1985 (İstanbul: Varlık Yayınları, 1985), 112.

37

Erden Kosova, "Gülsün Karamustafa ile Söyleşi", *art-ist*, no. 4 (September 2001).

38

Dieter Ronte, *Im zeichen der stadt: zeitgenössische kunst aus der türkei = Şehrin işaretleri: Türkiye'den Çağdaş Sanat* (December 2, 2001-February 17, 2002), exh. cat. (Bonn: Kunst Museum, 2002).

39

Turkey did not participate in the 29th Venice Biennale (1968), but it was represented at the 10th São Paulo Biennial (1969), held during the military government of Emílio Garrastazu Médici.

imaginative power of the street were more inspirational than the “institutional” presentation of pure art in 1968. Artists looked to the street rather than being a part of an “event”. This “non-participation” is also related to the policies of conservative and right-wing governments towards art and culture in a period when leftist politics and culture reached a broader context in Turkey. Many years later, during the Gezi Park Protests in the summer of 2013, the S.a.L.E.-Docks collective occupied the Turkish Pavilion and hung up photographs showing police brutality to protest against the government and sponsors of the Turkish Pavilion at the Venice Biennale. They asked: what should be the role of art in times of crisis?

On the other hand, the “absence” of participation in biennials such as the Venice Biennale, where artists are still represented in national pavilions, may also be considered an “anti” attitude, a stance against participating in such an art event. After the assassination of Hrant Dink (2007), an Armenian Turkish journalist who tried to reconcile Turkish and Armenian societies during his lifetime, artist Aydan Murtezaoglu withdrew from the Venice Biennale to which she was invited, stating that “identity and belonging had become problematic descriptions”. While similar experiences were seen in the radical atmosphere of the 1960s and 1970s, artists used these opportunities to question the impacts of nation-state ideology and capitalism on culture and art with artworks based on institutional criticism.

Participation after the 1990s

After the September 12, 1980 military coup, neoliberalism and the government’s privatisation policies would be reflected in various fields and state organisations, including art and culture. In the dark atmosphere of the 1980s, the voice of civil society was rising against the repressive politics of the government. Additionally, artists, whether individually or collectively, tried to revitalise the art and cultural scene with the exhibitions they organised, as the government did not give adequate support and importance to art and culture. In the 1980s, neo-conservative governments were on the rise, as was the commercialisation of art and cultural fields with the arrival of new art world actors, galleries and collectors. Turkey’s contemporary art would enter the artworld through the Istanbul Biennial.

In the era of globalisation, Turkey joined the rising voice of the global South’s contemporary art scene. Even though Turkish contemporary art showed tendencies similar to those of Western art in the 1960s and 1970s, the lack of art and cultural institutions such as contemporary art museums prevented its practices from being witnessed by international art critics, artists and audiences. In the 1990s, Turkey recommenced its participation in international biennials such as Venice and São Paulo after many decades of absence, and it carried with it the growing influence of the Istanbul Biennial on the international art scene.

The Istanbul Biennial began through the organisation of Eczacıbaşı Holding’s cultural initiative, the Istanbul Foundation for Culture and Arts (IKSV), when Turkey applied for full EU membership. Inviting international artists, art critics, and curators worldwide and attracting an international audience, the Istanbul Biennial became the showcase for Turkey’s contemporary art and its artists alike. For the 1st Istanbul Biennial (1987), officially titled 1st International Istanbul Contemporary Art Exhibition, Italian art historian and curator Germano Celant was commissioned to organise an international exhibition as part of the event, but it did not happen because its budget ran nearly equivalent to the budget of the biennial in its entirety.⁴⁰ Italian artist Michelangelo Pistoletto, meanwhile, did participate in the 1st Istanbul Biennial. Many Italian artists participated in the 2nd Istanbul Biennial

fig. 7
Giardini exhibition plan
(Turkey's space: 2), La Biennale
di Venezia, Catalogo della XXIX
Biennale di Venezia, Venezia:
Stamperia di Venezia, 1958.



(1989) coordinated by Beral Madra.⁴¹ The first two Istanbul Biennials presented the Turkish contemporary art scene to the art world and curators such as Pier Luigi Tazzi, Pierre Restany, and Harald Szeemann afterward stated that Turkey should already have taken its place in the international art scene.⁴²

Besides the Istanbul Biennial, other art and cultural events were instrumental in restarting Turkey's participation in the Venice Biennale in 1990. Held in the Fiera Del Levante area of Bari (March 16-20, 1989), the 14th EXPO-ARTE also included a special exhibition titled "Contemporary Art in the Mediterranean", for which Beral Madra curated Turkey's section. In an article published in *Gazetto Del Mezzogiorno* (Bari), Pietro Marino wrote, "Turkey, which has not participated in the Venice Biennale for many years, is holding a very striking and intense exhibition this time, and contemporary art in Turkey should be approached with a new perspective".⁴³

After a long interval, curator Beral Madra, who organised the first two editions of the Istanbul Biennial in 1987 and 1989, reinitiated Turkey's participation in the Venice Biennale in 1990 with the support of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and curated five iterations (1990, 1993, 2001, 2003, 2005) between then and 2007. With the impact of globalisation, periphery countries seemed to take as subjects the idea of other(ness) and non-Western art practices in representations of their art. Under Beral Madra's curation, discussions of non-Western approaches to Turkey, critiques of orientalism, otherness and east-west belonging were prominent themes to appear in the exhibitions' curatorial frameworks.

⁴¹

Artists Alberto Abate, Luca Alinari, Luciano Bartolini, Carlo Bertocci, Maurizio Bonato, Lorenzo Bonechi, Jose Manuel Broto, Daniel Buren, Patricio Cabrera, Luigi Campanelli, Miguel Angel Campano, Piero Pizzi Cannella, Bruno Ceccobelli, Mario Fallani, Lino Frongia, Giuseppe Gallo, Paola Gandolfi, Walter Gatti, Paolo Iacchetti, Massimo Livadiotti, Nicola Maria Martino, Tommaso Massimi, Elisa Montessori, Gianfranco Notargiacomo, Nunzio, Luca Maria Patella, Maurizio Pelegrin, Stefano Di Stasio, Marco Tirelli were among the participating Italian artists.

⁴²

Madra, *Bienal Yazıları*, 135.

⁴³

Beral Madra, "Bari'de Expo-Arte 89' ve Akdeniz'de Çağdaş Sanat Sergisi" (1989), <https://www.beralmadra.net/exhibitions/turkish-exhibition-in-expo-arte-bari->, last accessed May 2024.

fig. 8
Michelangelo Pistoletto, Mario Pistoletto and Beral Madra at the opening of 44th Venice Beinnale Turkish Pavillion Exhibition (1990)
© Beral Madra Archive.



fig. 9
Mithat Şen and Kemal Önsoy paintings, 44th Venice Biennale, Pavillion of Turkey (1990)
© Beral Madra Archive.



fig. 10
Serhat Kiraz, "The Time of Emptiness", 45th Venice Biennale, Pavillion of Turkey (1993)
© Beral Madra Archive.



When it resumed participation in the 44th Venice Biennale in 1990, the space reserved for Turkey was a 60m² (3 x 5 x 4 m) area in the Italian Pavilion, next to Iraq, Korea, and Nigeria, countries which did not have their own pavilions. For the Biennale, Beral Madra proposed four artists (Hasan Safkan, Kemal Önsoy, Erdağ Aksel, and Mithat Şen)⁴⁴ to represent Turkey amongst artists from forty-nine participating nations. Artist Hasan Safkan,⁴⁵ whose work was considered alongside the abstract and abstract-figurative paintings of Mithat Şen and Kemal Önsoy, was ultimately not included in the exhibition due to limited space and curatorial choices.

In the 45th edition of the Venice Biennale (1993), Erdağ Aksel, Serhat Kiraz, Adem Yılmaz & Jårg Geismar represented Turkey, again at the Italian Pavilion. Taking Turkey's participation as important for the visibility of its art, in the exhibition catalogue Beral Madra emphasised the disadvantages of Turkish artists' production in the period of "Turkey's transition from the periphery to center", "in the absence of art structures and institutions",⁴⁶ as these prevented them from being recognised by the art world public. While Aksel compared and investigated Eastern and Western traditions using Fatih Sultan Mehmed and his portrait painter Gentile Bellini, Kiraz⁴⁷ focused on comparing religious-dogmatic and rational thought using science, and specifically black holes. Adem Yılmaz & Jårg Geismar's *Inbetween* was a collective work realised with international migrant artists in opposition to the nationalistic approach to producing art, and was shown in the garden. Kiraz viewed Turkey's place in the Biennale as a "passage" since it necessarily depended on utilizing the Italian Pavilion's exhibition space.⁴⁸

fig. 11
Erdağ Aksel, "Here and Now and Then", 45th Venice Biennale, Pavillion of Turkey (1993)
© Beral Madra Archive.



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Beral Madra letter to Giovanni Caradente, April 4, 1990, in *La Biennale*, ASAC, Arti Visive.

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Giovanni Caradente found sculptor Hasan Safkan very interesting and the best choice amongst suggested artists by Beral Madra, and wanted to show Mithat Şen and Safkan together. Beral Madra letter to Giovanni Caradente, April 24, 1990, in *La Biennale*, ASAC, Arti Visive.

46

Beral Madra, "The Highway Leading into the Future is Quite Crowded", in *45th Venice Biennale, Pavillion of Turkey*, exh. cat. (Mas Matbaası: İstanbul, 1993).

47

As a visibility of Turkish contemporary art, Kiraz also had a gallery exhibition in Venice during the Biennale period.

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Madra, *Bienal Yazıları*, 145.

After its two participations in the 1990s, Turkey was not represented again at the Venice Biennale until 2001, for various reasons including the government's disinterest and disorganisation⁴⁹. This absence would be called "playing the missing"⁵⁰ by Madra, and she underlined the importance of participation to show Turkey's European face. In 1997, artists İnci Eviner and Serhat Kiraz were part of the exhibition "Modernities & Memories: Recent Works from the Islamic World", a parallel event of the 47th Venice Biennale for which Beral Madra

fig. 12
Ahmet Öktem, "Transit Identities" (The Perfumed Garden), installation view, 49th Venice Biennale, Pavilion of Turkey (2001)
© Beral Madra Archive.



was one of the curators. The exhibition was also shown in Istanbul in 1998. Once again, for these artists, modernism in non-Western countries, contemporaneity of their art practices, and their place in world art were the subject of this parallel exhibition.

The main exhibition of the 49th Venice Biennale (2001) was titled "The Plateau of Humanity" and curated by Harald Szeemann. For the Turkey Pavilion's exhibition title and content, curator Beral Madra took reference from the book *Perfumed Garden*, known as *One Thousand and One Nights*, written by Sheikh Omar Ibn-i Muhammed El Nefzavi about the sexuality of Eastern women in the 16th century. The book has attracted Orientalists and Western writers for centuries. Its Turkish translation was the subject of a lawsuit on obscenity charges, with the translator later acquitted in 1992. The exhibition featured artists Ahmet Öktem, Butch Morris, Murat Morova, Sermin Sherif, and x-urban, and was split up to be shown at two venues; Theis Park and Nuova Icona Gallery.⁵¹ At the next Venice Biennale (2003), Turkey presented its exhibition in the Arsenale in a 220m² area allocated for those countries without pavilions. The exhibition concept "limbo", which means "a region on the border of hell"⁵² can also be considered for discussions

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Beral Madra says; "We could not participate in the 46th, 47th, and 48th biennials – the 46th biennial was the 100th anniversary – because the invitation letters sent to the Ministries of Culture and Foreign Affairs were not answered in time". Beral Madra, "Türk Sanatçılara Teşekkürler", *Radikal*, June 18, 2007, <https://www.beralmadra.net/articles/radikal-gazetesi/turk-sanatcilara-tesekkurler/>, last accessed December 2023.

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Madra, *Bienal Yazıları*, 153.

51

This exhibition was also presented in Istanbul at Borusan Art Gallery, which was one of the Biennale's sponsors at the time (2001–2002).

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Beral Madra, "Concept Text IN LIMBO Twenty-four hours in the life of the viewer" (2003), <https://www.beralmadra.net/exhibitions/in-limbo-the-pavilion-of-turkey-50th-venice-biennale/>, last accessed April 2024.

about Turkey's place in the contemporary art scene and world art, as in the case of biennial participation after the 1990s.⁵³ At the 51st Venice Biennale (2005, curator Beral Madra), Cyprus-born fashion designer Hüseyin Çağlayan represented Turkey, and his video *The Absent Presence*, which features Tilda Swinton and combines different fields such as anthropology, biology, and genetics, once again took identity politics as the artwork's topic. In order to attract audiences, Turkey was presented at the Levi Foundation, which was supposed to be visited by forty-five thousand people a day during the Biennial, near the Peggy Guggenheim Museum.

After 2005, with the impact of the Istanbul Biennial on the world's contemporary art scene, and gradually rising interest in it, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs transferred the responsibility of participation in the Venice Biennale to IKSİ, after which one artist was generally selected for each iteration of the Biennale, instead of group shows. Participating artists were as follows: at the 52nd Venice Biennale (2007) Hüseyin Bahri Alptekin (1957-2007) (Curator: Vasif Kortun, b. 1958); at the 53rd Venice Biennale (2009) Ahmet Ögüt (b.1981) and Banu Cennetoğlu (1970) (Curator: Başak Şenova, b.1970); at the 54th Venice Biennale (2011) Ayşe Erkmen (b.1949) (Curator: Fulya Erdemci, b.1962-d.2022); at the 55th Venice Biennale (2013) Ömer Ali Kazma (b.1971) (Curator: Emre Baykal, b.1965); at the 56th Venice Biennale (2015) Sarkis (1933) (Curator: Defne Ayas, b.1978); at the 57th Venice Biennale (2017) Cevdet Erek (1974); at the 58th Venice Biennale (2019) İnci Eviner (1956) (Curator: Zeynep Öz, b. 1982); at the 59th Venice Biennale (2022) Füsun Onur (1933) (Curator: Bige Örer, b. 1977); and at the 60th Venice Biennale (2024) Gülsün Karamustafa⁵⁴ (1946) represented Turkey at the national level. An advisory board, mostly consisting of people from IKSİ, biennial sponsors, its affiliated art institutions, and artists and curators previously representing Turkey in the Biennale were responsible for the selection process. Most of the curators selected were from IKSİ or art institutions of Biennale sponsors, or were curators who had organised the Istanbul Biennial. For example, Fulya Erdemci was director of the Istanbul Biennial (1994-2000), and curated the 13th Istanbul Biennial (2013), while Vasif Kortun curated the 3rd and 9th Istanbul Biennial, Emre Baykal was director of the Istanbul Biennial (2000-2005), and Bige Örer was also the director of the Istanbul Biennial (2008-2024). As pioneers of contemporary art in Turkey, Sarkis (1933), Füsun Onur (1933)⁵⁵ and Gülsün Karamustafa (1946) were chosen for representation in recent years. İnci Eviner, Hüseyin Çağlayan, and Sarkis had a comprehensive exhibition at Istanbul Modern, Eczacıbaşı Holding's Museum. Most of the participating artists are also present in the collections of private museums. The exclusion of young, critical, and political artists from the Venice Biennale's delegations in favour of acclaimed ones is another controversial issue in the local art and cultural scene. In 2014, Turkey rented a long-term space for the Venice Biennale, with the support of twenty sponsors for twenty years, at Sale d'Armi, Arsenale at the the world's oldest first-league biennial, which had long excluded non-Western countries from its main venues.

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Participating artists: Ergin Çavuşoğlu, Neriman Polat, Nuri Bilge Ceylan, Gül Ilgaz, and Nazif Topçuoğlu.

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The curator, Esra Sarıgedik Öktem, who was selected as the curator of Turkey's Pavillion at the 60th Venice Biennale, resigned from her position as she avowed her support for Defne Ayas, whom members of the Istanbul Biennale board had selected, but who had been rejected by the Istanbul Arts and Cultural Foundation (IKSİ). There was controversy over this selection for the 60th Venice Biennale in the art scene because Sarıgedik Öktem, as an art dealer and gallery owner who is also representative of Gülsün Karamustafa, was not an ethical choice. Rhea Nayyar, "Turkish Curator Resigns From Venice Biennale Pavilion", *Hyperallergic* (August 14, 2023), <https://hyperallergic.com/839263/turkish-curator-resigns-from-venice-biennale-pavilion/>, last accessed December 2024.

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In cooperation with ARTER, Vehbi Koç Foundation's museum, Museum Ludwig (Cologne) organised "Füsun Onur. Retrospective" (September 16, 2023 – January 28, 2024), curated by Barbara Engelbach (Museum Ludwig) and Emre Baykal (Arter).

Artists from Turkey were also included in the main exhibitions of the Biennale⁵⁶, and the Istanbul Biennial's impact⁵⁷ can also be seen on these selections⁵⁸, as it was accepted that the Istanbul Biennial established a monopoly⁵⁹ on the Turkish contemporary art scene over time. Similarly, Carolyn Christov-Bakargiev⁶⁰ (the curator of the 14th Istanbul Biennial) said that she discovered Turkish art through the Istanbul Biennial: "I saw many of the Istanbul Biennials. Most of what I know about the art from Turkey, in general, was from the Istanbul Biennial. [...] René Block rediscovered Füsun Onur. I asked him to tell me about older artists".⁶¹ Thus, a network was formed through Istanbul Biennials and their curators. For example, in the main exhibition "Always a Little Further" at the 51st Venice Biennale (2005), curators Rosa Martinez and Maria de Corral invited Bülent Şangar and Semiha Berksoy, whom Martinez also presented at the 5th Istanbul Biennial (1997) she curated. For the main exhibition "Milk of Dreams" at the 59th Venice Biennale (2022), curator Cecilia Alemani selected Müge Yılmaz and Özlem Altın, both of whom were previously presented at the 16th Istanbul Biennial (2019). Taking its title from the book by Leonora Carrington, the Biennale gave a prominent place to unforgotten surrealist women artists. However, it did not include Turkish artists such as Tiraje, who had participated in André Breton's exhibition and met Max Ernst in her Parisian years. International curators learn about recent trends in contemporary Turkish art through Istanbul Biennials, not from art history writing, and they usually include artists that they have recently worked with. This can be also considered an obligation of the art market, and demonstrates how history is written.

Some of the artworks included in the main exhibitions were more political than those found at the Pavilion of Turkey. For example, Kutluğ Ataman was invited to the 48th Venice Biennale (1999) by the curator Harald Szeemann. Ataman's four-screen video *The Women Who Wear Wigs* (1999) is a powerful representation of identity and gender politics in contemporary Turkey, featuring four women from both the left and right wings who had to wear wigs for various reasons, including political activities, health problems, and gender issues. However, when Ataman⁶² was invited to the 56th Venice Biennale (2011) again after many years, his work was far removed from its earlier political stance.

National representations place a lot of responsibility on artists' shoulders. It is clear that, at a certain point, artists seem to deal more with global issues than local ones as a result of current Turkish politics and self-censorship. After the Gezi Park protests in 2013 and the attempted military coup in 2016, the

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For example: Kutluğ Ataman (1999), Hakan Gürsoytrak-Gülsün Karamustafa-Oda Project (2003), Semiha Berksoy-Bülent Şangar (2005), Fatma Bucak (2011), Yüksel Arslan (2013), Meriç Algün Ringborg -Kutluğ Ataman (2015), Hale Tenger-Nevin Aladağ (2017), Halil Altındere (2019), Müge Yılmaz-Özlem Altın (2022), Semiha Berksoy-Fahrelnissa Zeid-Nil Yalter-Güneş Terkol (2024) participated in the main exhibitions of the Venice Biennale's different editions.

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The impact of the Venice Biennale on the Istanbul Biennial is based on my article; Esra Yıldız, "From the Efforts of the Weak Horses to the International Arena: The Istanbul Biennial and Art Worlds", *International Journal of Arts Management* 25, no. 3, 74–85.

58

I also discussed about this point in my previous article. "Artists from Turkey could join different biennials, and that could be related to their being exhibited at the Istanbul Biennial for the first time before being represented in international biennials abroad. For the artists participating in important exhibitions and biennials abroad, the Istanbul Biennial was generally the first biennial at which their works were represented" Esra Yıldız, "From the Efforts of the Weak Horses to the International Arena: The Istanbul Biennial and Art Worlds", *International Journal of Arts Management*, no. 3 (vol. 25), 77.

59

Vasif Kortun. "Weak Fictions, Accelerated Destinies", in *İskorpit: Aktuelle kunst aus Istanbul (Contemporary Art from Istanbul)*, exh. cat. (Berlin: Berliner Kulturveranstaltungs-GmbH, 1998), 16-21.

60

As the artistic director of documenta's 13th edition (2012), and the drafter of the 14th Istanbul Biennial (2015), Carolyn Christov-Bakargiev included Füsun Onur and Cevdet Erek in both exhibitions.

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Halil Altındere and Süreyya Evren (eds.), *User's Manual 2.0: Contemporary art in Turkey, 1975-2015* (Istanbul: Berlin: Revolver Publishing; Art-ist, 2015).

62

In recent years, Kutluğ Ataman was harshly criticised by the art and cultural scene for supporting the AKP government.

governing party since 2002, the Justice and Development Party (AKP), increased pressure on civil society, targeting intellectuals and artists. This pressure was seen both directly and indirectly in the form of self-censorship by art and cultural institutions and their events. In recent years, IKSİV-organised cultural events have been criticised for being apolitical and censored. For example, the 16th Istanbul Biennial (2019), titled “The Seventh Continent” and curated by Nicolas Bourriaud, was about the impact of the Anthropocene in the 21st century. The Biennial brought an urgent world problem into the art scene by displaying works from around the world but turned a blind eye toward similar ecological issues in Turkey. During the AKP regime, natural sources and assets have been privatised, and ecological degradation has risen to an extreme level. Yet visitors did not see concern about these problems in the works of artists from Turkey. During the Istanbul Biennial, a meeting was held with the curator Bourriaud specifically for art historians in collaboration with AICA (the International Association of Art Critics) Turkey, but IKSİV stipulated that questions were to be collected from art critics beforehand. Organisers from IKSİV censored the thoughts of art critics to prevent them from questioning the Biennale’s content.⁶³

IKSİV is also responsible for organising Turkey’s participation in the Venice Architecture Biennale. At the 15th Venice Architecture Biennale (2016), the Turkey Pavilion presented Darzanà, a boat built from the waste of the Camialtı Shipyard in the Golden Horn and transported to Venice. This project sparked a discussion about the instrumentalisation of art and culture through corporate sponsorship, since the waste originated on account of the gentrification of the area, and to which many NGOs, local people and academics reacted, as a burden to the history of the workers.⁶⁴

As these examples show, the withdrawal of local politics from artworks reflects Turkey’s current political atmosphere. This situation continues in recent years, as can be seen in Turkey’s participation in the Venice Biennale, where body politics (*In Resistance*, Ali Kazma), migration, the refugee problem (*We, Elsewhere*, İnci Eviner), and environmental concerns such as water pollution (*Plan B*, Ayşe Erkmen), were the major subjects of artworks presented in a global context, without local concerns. As an artist who produced artworks about migration continuously during her career, when Gülsün Karamustafa was selected as a representative of the 60th Venice Biennale (2024) with her exhibition “Hollow and Broken: A State of the World”, she did not deal with the biennial’s theme “Foreigners are Everywhere” in the context of Turkey’s political condition as a country which hosted more than 3 million Syrian migrants officially. As a politically engaged artist, Karamustafa instead stated, “What I am dealing with is the state of a world hollowed out to the core by wars, earthquakes, migration, and nuclear peril unleashed at every turn, threatening humankind while nature is ceaselessly scathed and the environment made sick”.⁶⁵ It was a general answer to a global problem, one unconcerned with Turkey’s special political conditions.

At the 56th Venice Biennale (2015), Rakel Dink, the wife of Hrant Dink, used the words Armenian Genocide in her text in the exhibition catalogue, sparking a crisis to which the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Culture and certain sponsors reacted by preventing the distribution of the catalogue as a form of censorship. Artist Sarkis and curator Defne Ayas⁶⁶ tried to resist and call attention

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AICA Turkey should not have accepted this controversial meeting offered by the IKSİV. More recently, “Dying to Divorce” (2020) a documentary film about violence against women in Turkey, was not included in the 40th Istanbul Film Festival (2021) due to its political content, even though it was highly appreciated by the director of the film festival.

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T. Gül Köksal, “Altı asırlık mirasın yağması” (June 11, 2019), available at the link: <https://birartibir.org/alti-asirlik-mirasini-yagmasi/>, last accessed May 2024.

65

“Türkiye Pavilion opens at the 60th International Art Exhibition of La Biennale di Venezia”, <https://www.iksv.org/en/news/turkiye-pavilion-opens-at-the-60th-international-art-exhibition-of-la-biennale-di-venezia>, last accessed December 2023.

66

Curator Defne Ayas, who resisted censorship, was not selected as the curator of the 2023 Istanbul Biennial despite the advisory board’s decision regarding her position.

to the censorship by exhibiting the catalogues vertically in a coffin. “The Respiro” exhibition opened on April 23, 2017, a historically important date for the Armenian people. One of the thirty-six stained-glass panes in the installation showed Hrant Dink smiling against a background of pomegranates. As a part of “Respiro”, Sarkis’ artwork *Golden Icon* was displayed at the Hrant Dink Foundation in Istanbul. Recalling and revitalising various histories and memories, Sarkis brought a different perspective from other artworks previously exhibited at the Biennale. National representation was used to show cultural diversity and the unspoken history of so-called minorities in Turkey in an obscure way, without direct political reference.

Conclusion

Today, biennials are the dominant exhibition genre in contemporary art, and they are the central platforms for so-called decentralisation and the acceptance of non-Western art into the art world. At a time when the hegemony of biennials and global capitalism’s impact on contemporary art is most felt through art and cultural institutions and corporate sponsorships on a global scale, Chantal Mouffe’s proposal to create an agonistic public space⁶⁷ may be extended to biennials, when considered as the platform where contemporary art is most discussed. Another question to be asked is how the power of biennials can be turned into transformative platforms for artists and art, especially for countries like Turkey whose art is open to different interpretations due to its particular geographical, economic and political structures. The Venice and Istanbul Biennials occupy key positions for these discussions.

As has already been discussed in recent years, biennials are gradually establishing a hegemony over the production and spaces of art and culture as they increasingly grow in number. According to Pierre Bourdieu, culture is a means of legitimation and domination, and the universality and transition to universality, which biennials supposedly suggest, can be considered critically as a “transition to the monopolisation of the universal”.⁶⁸ For countries such as Turkey, where the history of modern and contemporary art museums does not go back such a long time, and contemporary art museums did not open until the 2000s, biennials are important cultural events for regulating the contemporary art scene using their hegemonic power.

The Academy of Fine Arts’ pre-1980s mission to send artists to biennials was taken over by IKSİ, which oversaw Turkish artists’ participation in the Venice Biennale at the national level after 2007. Because contemporary art has never been part of the cultural policy of certain governments, private sponsorship became dominant in this field, and the government intervened only indirectly to regulate participation.

In this sense, the role of biennials, particularly the Venice Biennale, is crucial for presenting Turkey on the international art scene, and it impacts Turkey’s cultural scene and institutions, such as private contemporary museums. For example, purchases made from the Scandinavian Countries Pavilion curated by René Block (the curator of the 4th Istanbul Biennial) at the 52nd Venice Biennale (2007), form the core collection of both the Vehbi Koç Foundation’s (a sponsor of the Venice Biennale Turkish Pavilion and main sponsor of the Istanbul Biennale for 2007-2026) Contemporary Art Museum and ARTER’s collections.⁶⁹

Some of the exhibitions were also shown in Istanbul after being presented at the Venice Biennale, and the Biennale disseminated its power and impact through various events. A selection from the 51st Venice Biennale under the

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Chantal Mouffe, *Agonistics: Thinking the world politically* (London and New York: Verso, 2013).

68

Pierre Bourdieu, *On the State Lectures at the College de France, 1989-1992*, transl. David Fernbach, (Malden: Polity Press, 2012).

69

René Block, İlkey Baliç, and Tankut Raşit Aykut, *Starter: Works from the Vehbi Koç Foundation Contemporary Art Collection*, exh. cat. (Istanbul: Arter, 2010).

title “Venice-Istanbul” (October 18, 2006-February 2, 2007) was opened at Istanbul Modern, an Eczacıbaşı Holding Museum, for the 150th anniversary of diplomatic relations between Turkey and Italy. Rosa Martinez, who curated the 5th edition of the Istanbul Biennial and was chief curator of Istanbul Modern at the time, said: “The Venice-Istanbul project shows how art can move from biennials towards museums and how it can gain new meanings through this transition”.⁷⁰ This transition, which presented itself as universal, actually brought a Euro-centric approach to the museum and expanded the Biennial’s ideology to the Turkish art scene.

In the pre-1980 period, issues such as the prolonged bureaucratic process with correspondence through consulates and foreign ministries, the late establishment of relations and extended communications with biennial administrations, insufficient financial support from the state, and difficulty bringing foreign currency to the country were significant factors influencing participation (or lack thereof) in the Venice Biennale. Although Turkey’s participation in biennials was always a goal of the Academy, it never achieved the desired level. Regarding biennial participation, Nurullah Berk said:

The commissioners, who were appointed with great difficulty, were given a weekly or ten-day allowance, and they were deprived of the additional allocation necessary for contacting or treating administrators, officials and critics, or even having a cup of coffee with milk. On the other hand, there were no “cultural attachés” in our embassies. Most embassies would find it drudgery to deal with the arts. The close attention and help of the commissioners depended on the intellectuality, goodwill, and understanding of the Ambassador.⁷¹

Similarly, regarding participation in the Venice Biennale in the 1950s and 1960s, Cemal Tollu said that most countries exhibited their works in pavilions they had built, and published their own catalogues for promoting their artists, in addition to the main catalogue, whereas Turkey was put in a corner as a guest of the “Italian Government”. He wrote: “Even though the embassies of other nations make an effort to invite worldwide art critics and well-known artists with elaborate banquets to introduce them to their own artists, we cannot go beyond *blinking in the dark*”.⁷²

This situation, evocatively described above as being unable to “go beyond *blinking in the dark*”, has begun to change over years, through international biennials, including Venice and Istanbul, and their impact on contemporary art and artists in Turkey, and their production after 1990. Eczacıbaşı Holding is the founding corporation of IKSİV, an art and cultural foundation which organises the Istanbul Biennial, and various festivals, and is responsible for selecting of artists and projects for important biennials such as Venice. IKSİV opened its own museum, which brings together modern and contemporary artworks, in the 4th Warehouse in Karaköy in 2004,⁷³ which was also used as one of the main venues of the Istanbul Biennial. Istanbul Modern, which had been the main venue for several editions of the Istanbul Biennial, underwent a transformation when it evolved from biennial to museum. It is but one example of the double-sided transformation of the museum-biennial relationship and the musealisation of biennials all over the world. This

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Rosa Martinez, “From Venice to Istanbul Modern, How Does Art Travel”, in *Venice – Istanbul*, exh. cat. (Istanbul: Istanbul Modern, 2007), 20.

71

Nurullah Berk, “Çağımızda Plâstik sanatlar”, *Cep* (November 1, 1966), 107.

72

Cemal Tollu, “1962’de Plastik Sanatlar”, *Varlık Yıllığı 1963* (Ankara: Varlık Yayınları, 1962): 63-69.

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The 4th Warehouse has been demolished and a new museum, which Renzo Piano Architects built, opened in 2023.

fig. 13
Hussein Chalayan, "The
Absent Presence", 51st Venice
Biennale, Pavilion of Turkey
(2005)
© Beral Madra Archive.



fig. 14
Gülsün Karamustafa, "Hollow
and Broken: A State of
the World", a site-specific
installation, 60th Venice
Biennial, Pavilion of Turkey
(2024)
© Esra Yıldız



situation is also a result of the growing influence of capital and private companies in contemporary art and biennial participation during the period of neoliberalism affecting the whole world after the 1980s, while Turkey was undergoing a rapid transformation after the September 12 military coup and the economic decisions made on January 27, 1980. The free market economy, supported by the policies of Ronald Reagan in the United States and Margaret Thatcher in England in the 1980s, showed similarities with the Turgut Özal era in Turkey. The aim of neoliberal policies to create brand cities and promote contemporary art globally was realised through international biennials, which would gain importance after the 1990s.

The international representation and visibility of Turkey, hampered by institutional and economic inadequacies, especially before 1980, in addition to relations developed solely through personal efforts that failed to go beyond “*blinking in the dark*”, have improved since 1990, when they found a more professional platform and network through the effects of globalisation and neoliberalism, as well as the support of private capital. Oliver Marchardt refers to biennials as hegemonic machines because of their increasing power to mediate local, national, and international relations, which is gradually overcoming that of art institutions.⁷⁴ Turkey’s participation in the Venice Biennale exemplifies this. However, the influence of these networks and biennials, with their impact on art historiography and international representation in Turkey, is becoming that of a hegemonic power. Examples discussed in the article such as the curators of the Venice Biennale’s different editions selecting artists from Turkey whose works were exhibited in the various Istanbul Biennials, some private museums⁷⁵ in Turkey forming their collections with purchases from the Venice Biennale, and a curator who had previously curated the Istanbul Biennial and Venice Biennale opening an exhibition of selected works from the Venice Biennale, all demonstrate the hegemonic effect of international biennales in the narrative of contemporary art in Turkey.

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Oliver Marchardt, “Hegemonic Shifts and the Politics of Biennialization”, (2008) in Elena Filipovic, Marieke van Hall and Solveig Øvstebo (eds.), *The Biennial Reader* (Ostfildern: Hatje Cantz Verlag, 2010).

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For example, a very recent exhibition at ARTER (2025) also highlighted the museum’s purchases from the Venice Biennale: “Maaria Wirkkala’s Landing Prohibited, an installation which was displayed at the 52nd Venice Biennale in 2007 and acquired the same year by the Arter Collection, is now set to meet audiences in Istanbul for the first time”. See, “Maaria Wirkkala: Landing Prohibited”, <https://www.arter.org.tr/EN/exhibitions/maaria-wirkkala-karaya-cikmak-yasaktir/5361>, last accessed February 2024.

Author’s Biography

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OBOE	Journal On Biennials and Other Exhibitions	Studies on the Venice Biennale: National Pavilions	Vol. 5, No. 1 (2024) Echoes
	Echoes The British Pavilion at the Venice Biennale: Navigating Frames and Reimagining Cultural Relations Stuart MacDonald Abstract This article examines the British Council's management of the British Pavilion at the Venice Biennale, exploring the complex interplay between different operational frames: showcasing British creativity, supporting creative sectors, conducting cultural diplomacy and advancing cultural relations. Drawing on recent research commissioned by the British Council, the analysis reveals tensions between national promotion and genuine cultural exchange. While the pavilion successfully fulfils its traditional role in cultural diplomacy and sector support, the article argues for a more intentional application of cultural relations principles in its management. It suggests that reimagining the pavilion as a platform for cross-cultural engagement and co-creation could pioneer a new model of pavilion diplomacy better suited to addressing contemporary global challenges. The article proposes practical steps towards embedding cultural relations priorities throughout the pavilion's curatorial processes and engagement strategies, while maintaining its other vital functions. In doing so, it presents a vision for evolving the British Pavilion's role within the Venice Biennale, potentially influencing how national pavilions contribute to international cultural engagement in an interconnected world. Keywords Cultural relations, Cultural diplomacy, Venice Biennale, British Council, National Pavilions, Cultural exchange		
OBOE Journal On Biennials and Other Exhibitions ISSN 2724-086X obojournal.com	Published online: December 31, 2024 To cite this article: Stuart MacDonald, "The British Pavilion at the Venice Biennale: Navigating Frames and Reimagining Cultural Relations", <i>OBOE Journal</i> 5, no. 1 (2024): 211-216. To link to this article: https://doi.org/10.25432/2724-086X/5.1.00013		

The British Pavilion at the Venice Biennale: Navigating Frames and Reimagining Cultural Relations

Stuart MacDonald

The British Pavilion, 2023. Entrance to the exhibition *Dancing Before the Moon*, featuring a commissioned work: *Thunder and Şimşek* by Jayden Ali which uses overhead steel vessels to represent Trinidadian steel-pan playing and Cypriot cooking, two ritualistic acts that evolved from colonial occupation of the Caribbean and Cyprus. Photos: Taran Wilkhu © British Council.



Introduction

This article, written from a non-academic perspective, discusses the British National Pavilion, at the 2023 Venice Architecture Biennale. It is based on a recent research consultancy report by an ICR Research team which included experts from the University of Bologna.¹ The research was commissioned by the British Council and drew, at their suggestion, on an innovative methodological approach which included ethnographic observation in order to provide insight into the extent to which the British Pavilion delivered cultural relations outcomes.

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Understanding the Cultural Relations Approach and Impacts through the UK Venice Pavilion, ICR Research for the British Council, (2024) (unpublished).

The Venice Biennale, with its historic system of national pavilions, has long been a stage for cultural diplomacy and national representation. For the British Council, which has managed the British Pavilion since 1937, the Biennale presents a unique opportunity to showcase British art and architecture, support the UK's creative sectors, and engage in cultural relations. However, as revealed in our report on the British Council's management of the pavilion, these various aims and frames can sometimes be in tension, particularly when it comes to balancing national promotion with fostering genuine cultural exchange and dialogue.

This paper explores the complex interplay of these frames and aims, and argues for a more intentional application of a cultural relations lens to the British Council's management of the pavilion. By reimagining the pavilion as a dynamic platform for cross-cultural engagement, collaboration, and co-creation, the British Council could not only advance its own organisational mission but also pioneer a new model of pavilion diplomacy that is more responsive to the needs of an interconnected world facing shared challenges.

Frames and Aims

The report identifies four key frames through which the British Council currently operates the British Pavilion: showcasing British art and architecture, supporting the UK's creative sectors, conducting cultural diplomacy, and advancing cultural relations. While these frames are not mutually exclusive, they do reflect different priorities and approaches.

Showcasing, which involves presenting the 'best' of British art and architecture on a global stage, emerges as the dominant frame in the British Council's strategic planning documents. This aligns with the Biennale's traditional function as a platform for national representation and promotion. The British Pavilion has a long history of exhibiting renowned British artists and architects, from Henry Moore and Barbara Hepworth in the post-war years to more recent Turner Prize winners Chris Ofili, Steve McQueen, and Jeremy Deller. In February 2020, Sonia Boyce was selected by the British Council to represent Britain at the Venice Biennale 2022, the first black woman to do so. In April 2022, Boyce won the Venice Biennale's top Golden Lion prize with her work *Feeling Her Way*. These high-profile exhibitions not only celebrate British creative excellence but also help to shape international perceptions of the UK as a dynamic, innovative, and culturally rich nation.

Supporting the UK's creative sectors is another key aim, with the pavilion providing valuable opportunities for British artists, architects, and curators to gain international exposure, build networks, and advance their careers. Participating in the Biennale can be a game-changer for individual practitioners, leading to new commissions, collaborations, and critical recognition. It can also have a wider ripple effect, raising the profile and competitiveness of the UK's creative industries on the global stage.

Cultural diplomacy, which seeks to further the UK's foreign policy goals and enhance its international reputation, is also a significant consideration. The pavilion provides a high-profile venue for engaging with global audiences, influencing perceptions of the UK, and strengthening bilateral relationships, particularly with the host nation Italy. Through targeted events, receptions, and visits by high-level delegations, the pavilion can serve as a focal point for diplomatic exchange and soft power projection. In the context of Brexit and the UK's evolving global role, the cultural diplomacy function of the pavilion has arguably taken on even greater significance. As the UK reconfigures its international relationships outside the EU framework, cultural institutions like the Pavilion serve as vital

The main hall of the British Pavilion, leading to galleries showcasing the artists' work. *The Dancing Before the Moon* film, in the main hall, observes rituals performed by the global diaspora in Britain, demonstrating an appreciation of land, community values and the sharing of space. Photos: Cristiano Corto © British Council



mechanisms for maintaining and strengthening European cultural ties. The Venice Biennale's status as the world's leading international art and architecture platform makes the British Pavilion particularly valuable as a space where British cultural achievement can be showcased independently of formal political structures. However, the precise impact of this shifting context on curatorial strategies and institutional priorities would require further research.

Cultural relations, defined as reciprocal transnational interactions between cultures that foster mutual understanding, collaboration, and dialogue, is perhaps the least explicitly articulated frame in the British Council's current approach to the pavilion. While the report identifies instances where the pavilion is already contributing to cultural relations outcomes, such as through the Venice Fellowship programme and the emerging Global

Commissioners' network, these tend to be more organically driven rather than strategically planned.

This is not to say that cultural relations is absent from the British Council's thinking around the pavilion. Indeed, the organisation's stated purpose is "to build connections, understanding and trust between people in the UK and other countries through arts and culture, education and the English language." However, in practice, the imperative to showcase British talent and advance national interests can sometimes overshadow the more reciprocal, dialogic, and collaborative dimensions of cultural relations.

Reimagining the Pavilion through a Cultural Relations Lens

Given the British Council's mission as a cultural relations organisation, there is arguably a compelling case for more intentionally leveraging the pavilion as a platform for cross-cultural engagement and exchange. By applying a cultural relations lens to its management of the pavilion, the British Council could not only advance its own organisational objectives, but also pioneer a new model of pavilion diplomacy that is more responsive to the needs of an interconnected world facing shared challenges.

So what might this look like in practice? At a strategic level, it would mean explicitly articulating cultural relations goals and priorities in the pavilion's planning documents, alongside those related to showcasing, sector support, and cultural diplomacy. This would provide a clear mandate and direction for pavilion activities, and help to ensure that cultural relations considerations are not treated as an afterthought or a nice-to-have.

Operationally, it would require embedding cultural relations priorities throughout the pavilion's curatorial processes, public programming, and engagement strategies. Suggestions from interviewees included:

Defining specific cultural relations objectives and indicators to guide pavilion activities and measure their impact. These could relate to fostering dialogue and mutual understanding between British and international audiences, facilitating cross-cultural collaborations and knowledge exchange, or engaging diverse communities and perspectives in the pavilion's programming.

Selecting curators and artists whose work aligns with cultural relations goals and who are skilled in facilitating cross-cultural dialogue and collaboration. This might mean prioritising practitioners with a track record of socially engaged, participatory, or co-creative practice, or those whose work explores themes of global relevance and resonance.

Designing events, and educational programmes that encourage active participation, mutual learning, and co-creation with diverse audiences. This could involve interactive installations, workshops, symposia, or performances that create opportunities for visitors to share their own stories, perspectives, and creative responses, and to engage in meaningful dialogue with each other and with pavilion staff and artists.

Investing in digital technologies to extend the reach and accessibility of the pavilion's cultural relations initiatives beyond the physical site. This could include online platforms for virtual exhibitions, webinars, and community engagement, as well as social media campaigns and digital storytelling projects that amplify diverse voices and perspectives.

Proactively seeking partnerships and collaborations with other national pavilions, cultural institutions, and local communities to develop shared

projects and narratives. This could involve co-commissioning works, co-hosting events, or co-developing educational resources that explore common themes or challenges from multiple cultural perspectives.

Capturing and sharing best practices and lessons learned to contribute to the wider field of cultural relations and inform future pavilion strategies. This could involve commissioning evaluations, publishing case studies, or convening dialogues with other pavilion managers and cultural relations professionals to exchange insights and ideas.

By taking these steps (and no doubt there are others), the British Council could potentially achieve significant cultural relations outcomes by leveraging the unique profile of the Venice Biennale. This has the potential to add value to the global impact of its arts and culture activities, and establish the British Pavilion as a space where diverse perspectives are explicitly valued, meaningful connections are forged, and collective action on global challenges can be catalysed.

Conclusion

The British Council's management of the British Pavilion at the Venice Biennale is a complex undertaking, shaped by multiple frames and aims. While showcasing British art and architecture, supporting the UK's creative sectors, and advancing cultural diplomacy are all important objectives, there is an opportunity to more fully realise the pavilion's potential as a platform for cultural relations.

By strategically aligning the pavilion's activities with cultural relations goals, the British Council could not only deliver on its organisational mission but also set a new standard for national participation in the Biennale - one that prioritises genuine cultural exchange, mutual understanding, and collaborative problem-solving. For this to happen, there would need to be a shift in mindset and practice, from seeing the pavilion primarily as a stage for national self-promotion to also embracing it as a space for global dialogue, learning, and co-creation. This could be achieved through planning processes which aimed from the outset to deliver cultural relations outcomes.

In an era of complex global challenges that demand collective action across borders and cultures, this reimagining of the pavilion's purpose and potential could not be more timely or urgent. In this way, the British Council could not only enhance its own impact and reputation, but also inspire other nations to follow suit, potentially pointing to a viable and sustainable future for national pavilions, and impacting on the Venice Biennale as a whole to help realise its potential to evolve into a more dynamic, inclusive, and socially relevant platform for international cultural engagement.

This is not to suggest that the British Council should abandon its other objectives for the pavilion, or that cultural relations should be pursued at the expense of artistic excellence, sector development, or diplomatic interests. Rather, it is to argue for a more integrated and balanced approach that recognises the interconnectedness of these aims and the unique potential of the pavilion to advance them all in mutually reinforcing ways.

Ultimately, the British Pavilion at the Venice Biennale represents a significant opportunity for the British Council to put its cultural relations mission into practice on a global stage. By embracing this opportunity with creativity, vision, and a spirit of openness and collaboration, the organisation could not only enhance its own - and the UK's - impact, reputation, and relevance, but also potentially contribute to a more inclusive and sustainable model for international art and culture.

Author's Biography

Stuart MacDonald is a former senior UK and Scottish Government civil servant with over 25 years' experience advising on culture and education in international relations. As Founder Director of ICR Research since 2019, he specialises in soft power and international cultural relations consultancy. His extensive career includes establishing the Centre for Cultural Relations at the University of Edinburgh (2012-16) and developing professional programmes for the European External Action Service. As Head of international Engagement through Tourism, Culture and Sport in the Scottish Executive, he

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OBOE	Journal On Biennials and Other Exhibitions	Studies on the Venice Biennale: National Pavilions	Vol. 5, No. 1 (2024) Echoes
	Echoes Between the Biennials: Cultural Networks in Times of Geopolitical Crisis Carmen Lael Hines, Helge Mooshammer, Peter Mörttenböck Abstract This essay unpacks key issues of transnational curatorial collaboration that emerged during the Biennale Architettura 2021, a high-profile cultural event marked by the uncertainties and challenges of the COVID-19 pandemic. The article places particular focus on the happenings of the Curators Collective, a coalition of national pavilion curators formed in relation to this particular Biennale, as a case study for considering the tensions and possibilities that come with mutually supportive networks in the context of international cultural exhibition events. <i>We Like</i>, the Austrian contribution to the 2021 Venice Architecture Biennial, dedicated to platform urbanism, became a site of transnational curatorial collaboration and is discussed in the article to contextualise the numerous projects and events of the first Biennale Architettura Midissage (August 27-29, 2021), jointly organised by several dozen national pavilions to fulfil the Biennale’s potential as a platform for synergistic collaboration, solidarity, and accessibility. Keywords Biennale Architettura 2021, Curators Collective (CC), Austrian Pavilion, Transnational collaboration, CC Midissage		
OBOE Journal On Biennials and Other Exhibitions ISSN 2724-086X obojournal.com	Published online: December 31, 2024 To cite this article: Carmen Lael Hines, Helge Mooshammer, Peter Mörttenböck, “Between the Biennials: Cultural Networks in Times of Geopolitical Crisis”, <i>OBOE Journal</i> 5, no. 1 (2024): 218-230. To link to this article: https://doi.org/10.25432/2724-086X/5.1.00014		

Between the Biennials: Cultural Networks in Times of Geopolitical Crisis

Carmen Lael Hines, Helge Mooshammer, Peter Mörtenböck

The etymology of Biennial means, quite literally, “every two years”. It denotes a temporal framework – a structure suggesting recurrence and sequence in space and time. Sometime in the latter half of the twentieth century, in the wake of hegemonic nation-building and contestations by anti-colonial movements, the definition of Biennial secured itself to suggest a temporary exhibition situated in a *particular* place that brings together international cultural positions for a *limited* period of time. Biennials exist as a liminal space between locality and globality and between presence and ephemerality. Biennials thus often become situated moments that play upon these juxtapositions. In this contingency, Biennials become spaces ripe for consideration of how structures, operations, and politics dictate global networks.

It is less the habitual stability and recurrence of these events that is currently being challenged by various kinds of crisis, than the ways in which their operations interact with new cultural sensibilities and aspirations. One of the many crises that framed the Centre for Global Architecture’s involvement in the Venice Biennale in 2021 was the COVID-19 pandemic, a crisis that dominated the spirit and execution

fig. 1
Venice Architecture Biennale
2021, Midissage organised
by the Curators Collective,
Austrian Pavilion, Venice, 2021
(photo: René Seindal)



of the 17th Venice Architecture Biennial at every logistical level. The spatial bringing together of over 50 nations for one cultural event was shaped by this unique moment in international relations. International measures introduced in response to COVID-19 forced the Biennial to be postponed and organised according to the vicissitudes of the pandemic. Upon consideration several years later, the strategies and actions which emerged as a result of these difficulties implicate profound systemic and structural reflections on how crisis shapes and orients international exhibition events and, further, how Biennials are shaped by geopolitics.

The organisational challenges brought by this crisis paved the way for several unique actions, one of which was the orchestration of a series of networked happenings that occurred within, outside and between the established Biennial apparatus. These happenings took their primary form at the midpoint of the Biennial, in late August, when a series of coordinated events occurred across Venice, united under the framework of a *Midissage* initiated by the curatorial team behind the Austrian Pavilion.¹ The events took place in various locations across the city, within the Giardini, Arsenale, and beyond. Some were geared towards the curators and exhibitors of the Biennial, and, on certain occasions, to the general public. The events were orchestrated by a self-organised coalition of national pavilion curators participating in the Venice Architecture Biennial 2021: The Curators Collective, or CC for short. They explored a range of themes through varied formats, such as public talks, book launches, informal gatherings, temporary installations, and organised walks. The events were tied together over the course of a few months, predominately through online meetings and email exchanges, and were communicated externally with a specific visual identity conceived by the team behind the Korean Pavilion *Future School*.

In a moment shaped by an urgency to “be together”, after months of uncertainty as to whether any form of gathering would be possible, several working groups within the CC emerged. These working groups developed as a structure for collaboration between pavilion curators on material projects that were all spatial, communicative and performative in character. These projects, and the working structure needed to realise them, came to form the structure and essence of the Curators Collective. A group led by Annie Pedret, Christian Schweitzer and Ryul Song, devoted itself to the creation of a manifesto stating the shared values of the CC in the form of a booklet. Titled *An Evolving Manifesto*, this text mapped the intentions, happenings and efforts of the CC. Indeed, the manifesto did not define itself as a finished text as such, but instead as a documentation of the *efforts* and intentions towards the development of a manifesto. The manifesto group asked, amongst other things, what it meant to articulate shared demands and values in the wake of an international crisis, and where the importance lay in advancing defined claims in the wake of international flux and adaptability. In the words of Schweitzer:

Architecture is a fundamentally social act. We can write a manifesto by doing it together as a social act, and thereby not create a manifesto but create architecture itself. A conversation is already a manifesto is already architecture. And I challenge you to engage in this conversation with even the simplest of thoughts. It is not about what we say, but that we say it, and the meaning and relevance will emerge inevitably through the confrontation of these thoughts with each other.²

The manifesto thus emerged as the tactile, yet performative and gestural process of creating a manifesto as such.

¹
“Transnational Midissage”, *e-flux Architecture*, August 2021, <https://www.e-flux.com/announcements/411226/transnational-midissage/>, last accessed November 2024..

²
Christian Schweitzer, “An Evolving Manifesto”, Curators Collective website, <https://curatorscollective.co/about/>, last accessed November 2024..

A second working group, *A Bench in Venice*, formed to support an international open call for design students to submit a proposal for a bench for installation in Venice during the summer of 2021. Led by the pavilion of the United Arab Emirates, and specifically curator Wael Al-Awar, participants in the CC worked together to develop, publicise and disseminate the open call across international contexts. It was indeed the structure of the CC which allowed for this open call to become even more global in scope, with curators sharing and disseminating the call amongst their national and international networks. Moreover, the CC facilitated coordination to ensure these benches could be constructed *between* respective pavilions. Detecting the bench as one of the key indicators and activators of common-space, students from all around the world were invited to propose designs for installation during the Biennial, becoming, in essence, a spatial manifestation of the urge towards collective gathering. Selected projects included: *El Banco del Mundo* (The Bench of the World), proposed by Alexis Olivares and Gonzalo Mazzey Arevalo of la Universidad Tecnologica Metropolitana UTEM in Santiago Chile, *The Space Between Six Circles* by Sigi Buzi and Jinsu Park of the University of Waterloo and USI Accademia di Architettura di Mendisio, and finally *BENCH(?)* proposed by Roberto Gonzalez Calderon, Emilio Padilla Villanueva, Braulio Angeles Martin and Eduardo Lopez Camarillo from la Universidad Nacional Autonoma de Mexico. Each of these projects, installed in the spaces between pavilions, utilised recycled, surplus materials from the Biennial.³ Each of them, though temporary in nature – formed a structure for collectivity, discursive exchange, and rest for Biennial visitors and participants.

fig. 2
Venice Architecture Biennale
2021, Midissage organised
by the Curators Collective,
Austrian Pavilion, Venice, 2021
(photo: René Seindal)



The third working group, that of the Midissage, was led by our team in the Austrian Pavilion. The intention behind the Midissage was to organise and enact the bringing together of people and ideas between and beyond the scope of the national pavilion. A joyous series of interconnected happenings at the height of summer, the projects and discussions related to the phenomena shaping the Midissage's context, including, but not limited to transnational curatorial collaboration, the state of architectural production today, and the future of our built environments. On Saturday, August 28, a public discussion hosted by the Hungarian Pavilion on "Collaboration, Cooperation and Cohabitation" and a press conference for local media organised by the Pavilion of the Dominican Republic was preceded by "Reflections on Curatorial Practice", and "Labour in the Platform City", both hosted by the Austrian Pavilion. Later in the afternoon, the curatorial team from the

³
"A Bench in Venice", *Curators Collective* website, <http://curatorscollective.co/a-bench-in-venice/>.

fig. 3
Venice Architecture Biennale
2021, Midissage organised
by the Curators Collective,
Pescheria, Venice, 2021 (photo:
René Seindal)



Spanish Pavilion led a shared walk through Venice to visit various national pavilions dispersed throughout the city. The day ended with an informal gathering at the Rialto Fish Market to celebrate the 17th Venice Architecture Biennial's realisation, after months of uncertainty due to the varying restrictions imposed on such events in the wake of COVID-19. With over 30 transnational events jointly organised by curators of national pavilions, including impromptu conversations with senior voices such as Saskia Sassen and Richard Sennett, the Midissage marked a unique point in time that helped to forge new forms of cultural solidarity beyond the protocols set up for such relationships.

The Midissage, and the many moments that comprised it, materially enacted the discursive intentionality that framed the CC's creation and foundation. As a multi-directional forum based on a shared desire for transnational dialogue and collaborative curatorial practices, the Midissage actualised a process which found its origin in the spring of 2020, when the Venice Biennale organisation announced the postponement of the 17th Venice Architecture Biennial.⁴ The announcement, though expected and in congruence with global circumstances, threw the exhibition plans from 113 participants coming from 46 countries into flux, forcing exhibition teams to resort to patience and speculative organisation. For an exhibition based on international interaction through orchestrated, spatial proximity, we, along with other curators, found ourselves enmeshed in quite contradictory circumstances of distance, isolation, and stasis. There was a sense of elusiveness as clear and reliable information became sparse. It was felt that the Biennale organisation's public announcements, which *outwardly* assured the exhibition's realisation in the coming months or year, did not fully align with the insubstantial information passed on to curators. How and when could the exhibition occur? And under what framework and timeline?

The CC's first meeting on May 23, 2020 formed as an active response to these challenges. Organised by Hae-Won Shin, the curator of the *Future School* exhibition at the Korean Pavilion, this first meeting, along with the many others that proceeded it, fostered a sense of mutual recognition, support, and relative clarity amidst the destabilising circumstances.⁵ Some curators, who were already in Venice for set

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"The 17th International Architecture Exhibition postponed to 2021", *e-flux Architecture*, May 2020, <https://www.e-flux.com/announcements/331892/the-17th-international-architecture-exhibition-postponed-to-2021/>, last accessed November 2024.

5

"Venice Architecture Biennale 2021 National Pavilion Curators Collective", *e-flux Architecture*, May 2021, <https://www.e-flux.com/announcements/392753/venice-architecture-biennale-2021-national-pavilion-curators-collective/>, last accessed November 2024.

up, reported to the group on what was happening on-site. Others shared pieces of information relayed to them by their respective commissioners and explained their internal plans moving forward. As a self-organised initiative, the origins of the CC both emerged within and outside the Biennial as a framework. In its evolution, the CC's main goal was to fulfil the Biennial's potential as a platform for synergistic collaboration between national bodies.⁶ This collective comprised of any curator involved in the Biennial during that particular period. Its definition prompted fluid membership and a constantly evolving list of participants. Participation was open and voluntary, and held together through strong personal ties.

In the Austrian Pavilion, the exhibition *We Like - Platform Austria* explored, through the performative research strategy of network-building, the impact of platforms (in an expanded sense) on the way we live together. We centered our study on the multi-dimensional role platforms play in spatial and governmental practices, which are increasingly impacting what cohabitation means, on various scales.⁷ This research orientation earned us a unique position of consideration, where indeed, the self-organised Curators Collective and institutional apparatus of the Venice Biennale intersected with the theoretical intentions of our programme. Our study on the potentials, limitations, and tensions at the heart of platforms as an organisational structure in contemporary city-making, aligned our work with the development and progression of the CC as something which was both real in its impact, and representative in its significance.

Platform architectures, like the Biennial, can facilitate exchange, collaboration and diversity. In dialectical tension with this, platforms are nonetheless enmeshed, and themselves engender, structural tensions which materialise in unequal economies of access, recognition and representation, as has been made even more apparent recently with controversies related to the recognition and positioning of Palestine as a national perspective at the Biennial. Indeed, in a world increasingly shaped by platforms, the production of architecture is becoming simultaneously oriented around both hyper-connectivity, and systemic isolation, owing to the fact that platforms mediate access. The CC, as an ongoing initiative within the context of the Venice Biennale 2021, rendered visible many of the dynamics we discovered during the course of our research. Specifically, it made apparent the positive expectations, yet structural tensions, characteristic of public stagings of cultural exchange, like the Venice Biennale.

Though novel in its specific character (as a network conceived in the context of the *Venice Biennale*), the CC's foundation in critical discursivity, international dialogue, and the fostering of counter-support structures within the wider Biennial apparatus, is not necessarily new, but rather part of a genealogy of self-reflective critique initiated by the de-colonial efforts of "Biennials of the periphery".⁸ Indeed, the "turn" to self-reflexivity and criticality inspired, over the preceding decades, discursive network-building within Biennial formats, one such example being The European Biennial Network.⁹ Formed in 2008 within the context of the Athens Biennial, the European Biennial Network was conceived as a transnational, collaborative structure which emerged in the wake of the financial crisis, and intended to offer self-organised mutual support to Biennial curators across Europe.

6

For more information on the CC's origins and scope, see: <http://curatorscollective.org>, last accessed November 2024.

7

For more information on "Platform Austria", see: "Platform Austria", *e-flux Architecture*, May 2021, <https://www.e-flux.com/announcements/343894/platform-austria/>, last accessed November 2024; and Peter Mörttenböck and Helge Mooshammer (eds.), *Platform Urbanism and Its Discontents* (Rotterdam: nai010 publishers, 2021).

8

Oliver Marchart, "The Globalization of Art and the Biennials of Resistance: A History of the Biennials from the Periphery", in *Conflictual Aesthetics* (Berlin: Sternberg Press, 2019).

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This is a concept described as the "second wave of Biennialization" by Anthony Gardener in: "Biennials of the South on the Edges of the Global", *Third Text*, vol. 27, issue 4 (2013).

In a similar vein as the CC, the European Biennial Network aimed to orchestrate a structure of dialogue through public interventions, paid residencies, and other planned events across various Biennials including: Liverpool, Athens, Lyon, Berlin and Istanbul.¹⁰ The analogous origins of the European Biennial Network and the Curators Collective raise significant questions regarding the reasons, purposes and potentials of network-building in contexts of crisis. What is the role of cultural discourse in such circumstances? And how can bottom-up structures of support be retained over a longer period of time? With these contextual queries in mind, the CC Midissage becomes an active example of the latent *potential* and *possibility* of spaces within the Biennial framework to enact alternative approaches to a Biennial's status quo. Indeed, the CC engendered a critical space of rupture within, between, and outside the Biennial apparatus. This prompts theoretical consideration: to what extent can critique, and contestation emerge from *within* a structure like the Biennial? How can this be actualised in ways that do not fall blindly into patterns of *passive critique*, and *resignation to un-resolvability* which often characterises critical curatorial practices operating within Biennial frameworks?

While functioning as dynamic forums of exchange and collaboration, critics agree that such exhibition events can simultaneously incorporate patterns of hegemony. In the words of art historian Joel Robinson, the architecture of the Giardini alone indicates a characterisation of the Biennial as a “geo-political superstructure”.¹¹ They function as “complex constellations of power relations”,¹² matrices which can foster and facilitate a range of paradoxical strategies and outcomes. They posture and actualise a bringing-together of diverse actors and critical discursivity, which are often flattened by their simultaneous proximity to elitism, nationalism, consumerism, and ethnic essentialisms. As argued by Kolb, Biennials simultaneously present ostentatious, hegemonic narratives of national identity and “economic potency”, alongside critical interventions aimed at deconstructing and questioning those very mechanisms.¹³ Indeed, this inherent paradox is a tension which Julia Bethwaite and Anni Kangas argue should not be simplified into something “resolvable”. Instead, these paradoxes reveal what they call an “‘intermingledness’ in varying degrees: economy, power, artistic expression, and other aspects come together in a sort of contested field with different outcomes”.¹⁴

The structural roots of the dialectical tensions at the centre of the Biennial format are, of course, linked to the world in which Biennials have been formed and are situated – worlds shaped by globalization, neoliberalism, and layered crises which perpetually engender the latter. Oliver Marchart argues that in an era of globalisation characterised by “struggles of legitimation with the evolving cartography of the world”, national governments use the framework to essentialise, and posture their potencies within an arena that embeds represented countries in competitive struggles of ‘legitimation’.¹⁵ Indeed, according to his argument, the decentralisation of the West which accompanied processes of globalization, motivated many Western countries to utilise Biennials as instruments for asserting “national or regional identities, or at least close ties to national and

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For more information on the European Biennial Network, see: <http://www.europeanbiennialnetwork.org/calendar.htm>

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Joel Robinson, “Folkloric Modernism – Venice’s Giardini Della Biennale and the Geopolitics of Architecture”, *Open Arts Journal*, issue 2 (Winter, 2013–2014): 2.

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Ronald Kolb, Shwetal A. Patel, Dorothee Richter, “Editorial”, *OnCurating*, issue 46 (June 2020): 9.

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Kolb, “The Curating of Self”, 67.

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Quoted in: Kolb, “The Curating of Self”, 69.

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Oliver Marchart, “The Globalization of Art and the Biennials of Resistance: A History of the Biennials from the Periphery”, *OnCurating*, issue 46 (June 2020): 22.

international funding bodies with their own soft power agendas”.¹⁶ They thus become “machines of hegemony” in their unique mediation between the “local, national and transnational”.¹⁷ These processes, according to his argument, were crucially juxtaposed by de-colonial responses from Biennials of the periphery, such as the Biennials of Habana and Gwangju. Indeed, responding to the evolving global cartographies brought by globalization, these Biennials act as “means of decentralizing the West” through models of transnational exchange, and “merging layers of subjectivation”.¹⁸ In the words of Okwui Enwezor: “In the wake of the globalization of culture and art, the postcolonial response to it has produced a new kind of space, a discourse of open contestations which do not spring merely from resistance, but rather is built on an ethics of dissent”.¹⁹

As Marchart’s analysis situates a conflictual reading of Biennials in a “central – periphery scheme”, it calls into question whether such an argument can be applied to the Venice Biennale specifically so as to reflect on the CC. The Venice Biennale is typically characterised as the epitome of Eurocentric, colonial traces of hegemonic representation for many reasons, one of them being its close historical associations with the World Fair and processes of nation-building in an era of industrialisation and colonisation.²⁰ Overall, his argument is helpful in emphasising the conflictual tensions at the centre of Biennalisation as a process, which carries both “colonial traces and post-colonial relations” into a “contested sphere” for a very “limited group of people”.²¹

Ronald Kolb similarly argues that the discursive, critical exchanges characterising Biennials, which contradict the structural forces informing their very framework, are tensions which link to agendas of neoliberalism, reproduced in and around the Biennial structure. He argues that Biennials, in their intimate relationship with conceptions of the nation-state, reproduce what Foucault describes as the “art of governing” of the *modern* nation-state and its institutions. In this context, he refers to the way that critiques of an institution function to regulate sovereign power, in order to eradicate the possibility of removing the said power altogether. In other words, the “art to not be governed like that”.²²

These recently proposed analyses situate theories of Biennalisation within Postcolonial and Foucauldian discourses. From engaging with these emerging veins of thought, alongside our research on platforms as organisational structures, the various incidents of the CC reveal the tensions at the heart of Biennials and their political contexts. These incidents are thus given contextual shaping and critical significance. Within the CC, issues of legitimation, recognition, obscuring of labour, and proximity to passive critique became clear – which speak to theories of the Biennial as a managerial apparatus within a framework of global political economics.

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Paraphrasing Marchart, Ronald Kolb, Shwetal A. Patel, Dorothee Richter, “Editorial”, 9.

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Marchart, “The Globalization of Art”, 22.

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Paraphrasing Marchart, Ronald Kolb, Shwetal A. Patel, Dorothee Richter, “Editorial”, 8.

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Okwui Enwezor, “Mega-Exhibitions and the Antinomies of a Transnational Global Form”, in *Other Cities, Other Worlds: Urban Imaginaries in the Globalized Age*, edited by Andreas Huyssen (Durham: Duke University Press, 2008).

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Marchart, 22.

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Paraphrasing Marchart, Kolb, “The Curating of Self”, 70.

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Kolb, “The Curating of Self”, 67–72.

When we programmed the Midissage, it became apparent that such an intervention was outside of Biennial protocol. For a range of reasons, we were confronted with the need for all events to remain within the boundaries of national pavilions, and to adhere to the respective regulatory framework of each pavilion, enforced by structures in charge such as commissioning bodies, national governments and the Venice Biennale organisation. To use abstract terms, “between” and “beyond” were not permitted. For instance, as the Austrian Pavilion, one could host an event within the pavilion, and invite representatives from the Serbian Pavilion situated just a few yards away. But one could not, hypothetically, collaborate on an event with the Serbian Pavilion in the physical space “between” the pavilions without proper adherence to complex protocol.

In one specific case, the curators of the British Pavilion organised a public discussion in collaboration with the Austrian and Peruvian Pavilions on the subject of private versus public space. In line with the themes of the talk, curators Madeleine Kessler and Manijeh Verghese sought to host this conversation on the steps of the British Pavilion, or interstitially between the German and British Pavilions. Upon this request being denied by the British Council, a possible resolution was offered by one of the curators of the German Pavilion who suggested that perhaps the intervention could be hosted within the German Pavilion, which would be able to accommodate it, in terms of space. However, it quickly became clear that the commissioning and regulatory bodies from Germany could not permit such an intervention due to their existing matrix of protocols. The solution was thus to host the conversation in the conference room of the Central Pavilion, as provided by the Biennale organisation.

This anecdote serves to prove what Stefano Harney and Fred Moten describe as the hegemony of “good management”. According to Harney, management can be characterised as the organisation and regulation of what it decides is “informal”.²³ However, it is not sufficient to broadly state that all informality, and all the contours of the “between” are not permitted. Rather, there is a process of regulation and hierarchy of who has access to “this between-ness”, and for what purposes. For instance, the Pavilion Days, introduced during the Venice Biennale 2021 and endorsed and supported by the Biennale organisation, functioned as a kind of “Midissage” for each nation’s commissioning bodies. During the Pavilion Days, the curators become transient characters of the exhibition, only to be replaced the coming year, whereas the Commissioners Group, as a platform, maintains its form. Network-building, and the generative potentials of discursive, transnational exchange is at the core of the Biennial apparatus. But its endorsed enactment is not universal – it is contingent upon the roles attributed to particular stakeholder groups. From this, to state that the CC Midissage ruptured the Biennial apparatus through enacting “the between” may be too simplistic. The CC Midissage momentarily ruptured the apparatuses which designate what is formal or informal, contained or “fluid” – and thereby, what is “allowed” to be “between”.

More than solely regulating the informal, Harney and Moten argue that the concept of management functions as a “seizing of the means of social reproduction”.²⁴ Social reproduction comprises a range of actions and processes – but broadly refers to the processes in which one is able to re-produce their ability to function and exist, healthily, in society. Some features of this include mutual support, informal acts of recognition, solidarity, and community building.²⁵ Social reproduction functions through processes of relationality, of platformed engagement, of mutual support and recognition. Again, these organisational procedures are not banned, but rather

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Stefano Harney and Fred Moten, *The Undercommons: Fugitive Planning and Black Study* (New York: Minor Compositions, 2013): 130.

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Harney and Moten, *The Undercommons*, 74.

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Stefano Harney and Fred Moten, *All Incomplete* (New York: Minor Compositions, 2021).

regulated within a rigid economy of access. *Who is allowed to engage together and why?* The difficulties in materially realising moments which enact and are formed by processes of social reproduction are, due to hierarchies of access to informality, indicative of the wider role of management today.²⁶

To work around the difficulties in hosting discussions with and between pavilions, while respecting these regulations and fundamental safety requirements, the CC developed a hosting strategy. Respective nations would agree to organise, or “host” events within the boundaries of their own pavilions. To facilitate the “between” we sought collaboration with other pavilions and interaction not literally and ideologically enclosed within the boundaries of national frameworks – we developed a communicative platform system. Each curator would send an email, summarising their planned event (time, place, title and description) to a member of our curatorial team. We then structured and arranged all of these interventions into a calendar, which was circulated to all members of the CC, in order to facilitate movement between the interventions. Furthermore, certain pavilions, those with the resources and the space, offered countries without the means to utilise their pavilions in order to realise their interventions. This became a form of alternative organisation, one which internally ruptured the regulatory framework.

The Midissage, and the CC in general, was centered on all phenomena associated with an expanded concept of “the between”. The between in terms of space, in terms of discourse, in terms of breaking down the boundaries of national isolation. The Midissage itself marked neither the beginning nor end, but highlighted the duration of a process, of a state of “between”. It proposed a conception of time outside the rhythms of the Biennial structure, with its grand openings and endings marked by record numbers of visitors. Through the very act of questioning these landmarks, the CC proposed a temporal, and general, sense of irregularity. In doing so, the CC relied on processes of self-legitimation due to a lack of authorisation and institutional recognition, which again linked to its existence outside of Biennial protocol. Relying on structured informalities, systems of mutual legitimation, and recognition – the CC made clear that these economies are prevalent in the Biennial framework. In an attempt to navigate these economies as we organised the Midissage, the CC, self-organised and informal by nature, challenged and re-oriented the rules and boundaries that define these economies.

As a coalition of participants in the Biennial, uniting and requesting recognition for the labour of these mutually supportive actions, the CC is in a sense a union of curators, with demands, requests, and structural gestures. However, it is crucial to note that the CC was not the only crisis-driven organisational structure which ruptured the regulatory framework of the Biennial this summer. It was part of a larger process within the Biennial of worker-organisation and unionisation, which all linked back to the impacts of the COVID-19 crisis.

Many people from Venice and the surrounding area of Veneto rely on the Biennial as a source of income and employment. With the Biennial postponement in 2020, many annual Biennial workers were forced into financial precarity and reliance on ephemeral and uncertain employment, creating an atmosphere of a crisis-driven need for mutual aid and support. As the Biennial commenced, a range of incidents left many Biennial employees eager to advocate for their collective well-being, and workers’ rights. Out of necessity, employees of various pavilions began meeting, planning, and conversing via Whatsapp groups and arranged assemblies. These assemblies, which resulted in collective bartering for more support from the Biennial organisation via formal letters and manifestos, occurred in the same month as the planning and realisation of the CC Midissage – though the two initiatives

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See Nancy Fraser, “Contradictions of Capital and Care”, *New Left Review*, issue 100 (July/August 2016).

were not themselves connected.²⁷ These two threads of self-organisation occurred simultaneously, proving that the COVID-19 crisis produced active initiatives for mutual support in an atmosphere of infrastructural crisis.

Networks are architectures. In a neoliberal economy, their adaptability makes them attractive to hegemonic market forces predicated on constant exchange. Yet networks can also be agents of social reproduction as a structure for mutual support. The inherently supportive character of networks make them architectures that often emerge and are enacted during crisis-driven or precarious conditions. Some theorists, such as Naomi Klein, argue that this can be instrumentalised to normalise crisis, or sway away from actual, structural change.²⁸ Indeed, networks are both responses to crisis, and perhaps reproducers of the social norms that justify them. This makes them into bleeding edges. With this complexity in mind, we find implicit in the events of CC the many paradoxes and tensions of neoliberal cultural economies, paradoxes intensified during times of crisis, such as COVID-19.

Within the field of urban theory and geography studies, there have been a plethora of investigations and writings proving the importance of physical clustering and networking as essential features of the creative economy. This is because the cultural sector, or in this case, the curatorial sector of Biennials, is embedded in the social and economic logics that procure it as such. Networking, social dynamics and relations of exchange in localised spaces play a foundational and crucial role in the creative economy for *sector-specific* reasons.²⁹ Some of these reasons, to cite economic geography literature more generally, are consequent to the nature of working patterns in the sector, which tend to be characterised as unstable, temporary and ephemeral. Networking is important to access work, obtain future contracts, or combine efforts to apply for self-sustaining funding grants.³⁰

In the case of the Venice Biennale, networking becomes a crucial source of value in a framework which is, by definition, ephemeral, meaning the work is economically unsustainable in the long term. To network is to secure the possibility for future chances of sustenance in an industry held together through formal, informal and social ties. Additionally, social dynamics are fundamental to the creative sector in that they “enable cultural intermediaries to set values and trends”.³¹ The setting of values is fundamental in the context of cultural work that engages with political, ethical and social questions – such as “How will We Live Together?” Without sounding too candid, the answer to the question is and must be conceived collectively to hold substance and weight. The CC was a result of this necessity, or urgency, towards forming and articulating shared values.

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Workers across the Biennale were engaged in a struggle with the Biennale organisation about access to free testing upon the introduction of the Europe wide green pass. The green pass would require all who entered the Biennale premises to be either vaccinated (with two vaccines), or tested. During this time, the vaccine roll out was still very much a work in progress, which meant that many workers had not yet received their vaccine, and were forced to test in order to enter their place of work. Institutionally seen as an “external” private requirement, this service was not provided by the Biennale organization to workers, but only to “Biennale employees”. It forced the workers who maintained, guarded, and ran each pavilion, to stand hours in waiting lines, and pay fees of up to 40 euros for tests, in order to enter their places of work and materially realise the exhibition(s).

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See Naomi Klein, *The Shock Doctrine: The Rise of Disaster Capitalism* (New York: Knopf Canada, 2007).

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Roberta Comunian, “Exploring the role of networks in the creative economy of North East England: Economic and cultural dynamics”, in *Encounters and Engagement between Economic Cultural Geography*, edited by Barney Warf (New York: Springer, 2012), 143–157.

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Helen Blair, “You’re Only as Good as Your Last Job”: The Labour Process and Labour Market in the British Film Industry”, *Work, Employment and Society*, issue 15 (2001): 149–169.

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Tom Fleming, “Supporting the Cultural Quarter? The Role of the Creative Intermediary”, *City of Quarters: Urban Villages in the Contemporary City* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2002).

However, with all of the positive benefits that can come from network making, there are risks of exclusivity at the core of “network think”. As described by Hannah Knox, Mike Savage and Penny Harvey of the University of Manchester, in applying social network analysis and anthropology as networks are operationalised, they

paradoxically [begin to] operate as a bounded community rather than as a network, and that one implication is that it does not unravel significant difference in approach amongst its own ranks... Given that, then any attempt to define a bounded group (within which one can examine the whole network) will ultimately contradict the network idea itself.

In essence, to call something a network is a paradoxical exercise, an open structure which nonetheless requires definition and therefore sets up barriers. In the case of the CC, this was a collective created for curators within the context of a particular Venice Biennale. These questions of accessibility and definition formed the core of discussions once the Venice Biennale 2021 came to a close. How would the network be thus defined? Would its binding too ultimately prove to be the Biennial itself – a particular group that took part in the Biennial at that time? How would the network move and change? To resolve these questions became a complex exercise, as the conditions of each member of the collective of course changed as the Biennial concluded. As the network slowly began to fizzle away, we began to question, collectively, if, how and where the substantive and generative future of the CC would be situated.

In “Bodies in Alliance and the Politics of the Street”, Judith Butler writes that “we miss something of the point of public demonstrations, if we fail to see that the character of a space is being disrupted and fought over when crowds gather”.³² Expanding, she claims

bodies in their plurality lay claim to the public, find and produce the public through seizing and reconfiguring the matter of material environments; at the same time, those material environments are part of the action, and they themselves act when they become the support for action.

Throughout this article, we have referred to the CC as a reinvigorating force within the Biennial apparatus. We have also referred to the CC as a coalition, a self-organised, expanding network, an alternative “public” within the context of the Biennial. “The space” to which Butler refers, in this context, becomes the framework of the Biennial, not just the Giardini or Arsenale, but the Biennial as a space of cultural exchange. Following her argument, the incidents and origins of the CC should not solely be deemed a rupture to an established hegemonic space. Instead, it should be emphasised that the act of gathering within the Venice Biennale framework actually negotiates the character of that space: its potential to expand inclusivity, to expand access, to foster diversity and exchange. Butler also asks: “how does plurality form, and what material supports are necessary for that formation? Who enters this plurality, who does not, and how are such matters decided?” To sustain itself, the CC, as a plural, communal body – or perhaps as a structure or idea, would consistently need to interrogate the tensions and conditions of its own plurality and facilitate the coming together of different groups at different moments. The emergence of the CC proves that amidst hegemonic underpinnings, the Biennial as a platform can provide the conditions for its own change. But the question became – what would the CC rupture outside of the institution within which it was

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Judith Butler, “Bodies in Alliance and the Politics of the Street”, *Transversal Texts* (September 2011), <https://transversal.at/transversal/1011/butler/en>, last accessed December 2024.

conceived? To what kind of structure would it need to relate, if not a particular city – or a simulated, temporary locality? What kind of publics could it facilitate?

To refer back to the language used at the beginning of this article, the Curators Collective was a network formed both within and against (or rather in between) the protocols of the Biennial institution. If the CC is thus defined as a series of happenings that challenged the rigidity of the Biennial structure, the overarching question became, how would such a collective sustain itself outside of the context of the Venice Biennale? As an alternative network related, inevitably, to the platform that brought curators and activities together in the first place – how might such an endeavour sustain itself outside of that contextual axis?

In addressing these questions, multiple interconnected strategies were conceived by members of the collective. One such strategy was to open up the CC, as a platform structure, to another *generation* of curators. Facilitated through direct communication with pavilion curators, individuals were contacted and incorporated into the CC framework for their own use. This incoming collective formed its own series of events in sync with the opening of the 18th Venice Architecture Biennial in May 2023. These activities aligned with a Biennial articulated through “rupture”. Indeed, Lesley Lokko’s *Laboratory of the Future* was a Biennial which, with urgency and precision, addressed post-colonial balance, with the majority of its 89 contributions coming from Africa and its diaspora. In the words of Chris Foges, this Biennial was an “uncomfortable and uplifting” exhibition confronting architecture’s complicity in post-colonial violence and environmental destruction.³³ The exhibition directly confronted the colonial histories of what Biennials entail, while also employing its status as a platform to make visible and recognise subaltern and diasporic perspectives within the canon of architecture. These efforts feel like a prominent ripple in an expanding global wave, not only within the Biennial in Venice, but across the cultural world. This is a shift towards engagement with institutions alongside efforts to inhabit them and enrich them with new protocols. During the Venice Art Biennial 2022, an informal *Firsts Solidarity Network* of national pavilions was established as “an artist-led initiative comprising of artists who are a first-time representative from a marginalised or under-represented group in their respective country or a first-time country participant at the Venice Biennale”. This solidarity network formed a “route” through the Biennial for visitors – one which quite literally ruptured the directional lines of the Biennial through direct engagement with representation and the colonial implications of being “first”.

With these practices and efforts in mind, the CC has become, more than anything, implicative of a wider, evolving process. Its evolutions and iterations speak to the themes guiding what cultural production means today. It was a series of happenings that evolved into persons, conversations and efforts rendering the CC a vehicle and emblem of an evolving process. Rather than reproductions of static models, the cultural sector continues to evolve in critical cohesion with the geopolitical crises that exist atop and adjacent to it. These cohesions are by no means universally smooth and require constant re-configuration and evaluation. But the effort to connect, conceive and respond together – and question the meaning of exchanging together in space for a defined period of time, or in a particular structure – is an activity that can continue to unite the cultural community into widening, evolving and expanding networks of international solidarity for years to come.

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Chris Foges, “National Pavilions take on Venice Biennale’s decolonisation and decarbonisation themes”. *The RIBA Journal*. 16 June 2023.

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Afterword

Against the Domestication of Antagonism. Calling for a New Methodology for the Study of National Pavilions

Clarissa Ricci

The fifth edition of the *OBOE Journal* emphasises the necessity for a fresh approach to National Pavilions studies. The examination of national pavilions has historically generated some unease among academics. Accusations of being geopolitically outdated often arise, as National Pavilions tend to evoke nationalism when they seek to honour a specific and partial cultural narrative of a nation and localism or provincialism when they concentrate on particular stories from a specific location. While the list of concerns could be extended, it might also be argued that the pavilion has always acted as a space for inspiration and reflection for artists, especially after its complex character and representative identity evolved following World War II, leading to groundbreaking projects like Hans Haacke's in 1993, which stands out as one of the most iconic examples.

Discomfort in addressing National Pavilions has not deterred scholars from pursuing valuable research avenues. For instance, the Swiss group Sik-Isea lead by Beat Wyss has suggested a comparative study,¹ while Angela Vettese proposed in 2014 that we reverse our perspectives on pavilions,² viewing them as agents in the development of the Biennale. More recently, Stephen Naylor has been examining the National Pavilions of the Venice Biennale to investigate the progression of international contemporary art trends in the Asia-Pacific region.³ However, there remains a shortage of studies focusing on National Pavilions, with many still in preliminary stages. It is crucial to compare the outcomes of these studies, including insights from the fifth issue of *OBOE* and earlier research, to address the challenges of tackling a subject often diminished in the narratives surrounding the Venice Biennale, reduced to a mere aspect of the event.

The relevance of pavilions is just under our eyes. Whenever geopolitical events occur, we all look to the pavilions to observe how they will react. Every stance taken shapes the narrative that the Biennale itself presents. When the Biennale designated

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Beat Wyss, "Comparative Art History: The Biennale Principle", in Clarissa Ricci (ed.), *Starting from Venice: Studies on the Biennale* (Milan: et. al), 50-61.

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Angela Vettese, *I padiglioni nazionali della Biennale di Venezia come luoghi di diplomazia culturale/The National Pavilions of the Venice Biennale: Spaces for Cultural Diplomacy* (Venice: Monos, 2014).

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

the central area as Piazza Ucraina, it stood as a proponent of peace; however, the presence or absence of a pavilion has sometimes resulted from compromises or commercial dealings, as seen with the African Pavilion in 2007.

Nonetheless, the reflections emerging here do not aim to support or undermine the pavilions. We understand that they are the product of a complex interplay of particular situations, political agreements, cultural intentions, and diplomatic decisions in which artists and curators engage.

We believe though that the National Pavilions of the Biennale provide an advantageous focal point for studying exhibitions, serving as a connector where various disciplines – economy, politics, urbanism, and market – intersect.

Interactions at multiple levels and across different fields characterise large-scale exhibitions. Among the scholarly works on exhibitions that have attempted to integrate various dimensions, the Afterall monographs deserve particular recognition.⁴ These have made that methodological effort of not leaving a single narrative voice with the responsibility of telling a story and taking the various points of view: curatorial, artistic, social, and political. The National Pavilions also allow for the addition of historical depth and bring international relations into the theme in an even more accentuated way. Given that the study of exhibitions inherently links to interdisciplinarity, how can we effectively apply it? Is it merely about compiling information from other fields? Introducing varying perspectives?

We hypothesise that a more nuanced reflection can be developed, and new methodologies warrant consideration. For instance, what about applying intersectionality to the history of exhibitions? Or, analysing exhibitions through the lens of the system? As Andrea Fraser indicates, the emergence of the exhibition system fully intersects with related fields for varying purposes.⁵ These are warnings, as we should not overlook the need to dismantle the economic, epistemological, and exhibition-related frameworks and practices that perpetuate narratives in hierarchical ways.

This marks the first occasion that we are penning an afterword for one of our issues. Each issue is inherently incomplete, suggesting new paths for inquiry, contributing to a deeper understanding of biennials and other exhibitions, and paving the way for new discussions. However, in this instance, we also feel compelled to emphasise the necessity of being cautious about domestication.

Echoing the concern that Nanne Buurman highlighted in her examination of documenta's rhetoric of being a democratic exhibition, our goal should be to "complicate the overly simplistic associations of large-scale exhibitions with democracy",⁶ peace, tolerance, and generic internationalism, which overlook the various regimes of governmentality at play within curatorial frameworks and beyond. One objective is to warn against efforts to politicise exhibitions under the guise of an ethical representation that often merges diversity with democracy, potentially leading to a simplification of difference in the service of identity politics, which upholds essentialist views of cultural identity.

We therefore invite you to participate in future reflections in person or on the page. This job is for all of us.

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The Exhibition History series was launched in 2010 in association with Asia Art Archive, the Center of Curatorial Studies, Bard College, documenta Institut, and the Faculty of Fine Applied and Performing Arts, University of Gothenburg. List of publications at <https://www.afterall.org/projects/exhibition-histories/#About>, accessed December 2024.

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Andrea Fraser, "The Field of Contemporary Art: A Diagram", *e-flux Notes*, October 17, 2024, <https://www.e-flux.com/notes/634540/the-field-of-contemporary-art-a-diagram>, accessed December 2024.

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Nanne Buurman, "d is for...? documenta and the politics of (re)presentation", *Field*, no. 18-19 (2021) <https://field-journal.com/issue-18-19/d-is-for-documenta-and-the-politics-of-representation/> accessed December 2024

**Diego Tonus,
Hour of the Wolf, 2010.
Film Mini Dv,
Colour/Sound, 75'**

HOUR OF THE WOLF is a film documenting the backstage of *The Collectors*, a project curated by artists Michael Elmgreen & Ingar Dragset for the Danish and Nordic Pavilions at the 53rd International Venice Biennale of Art.

The video captures the dismantling and demolition of the exhibition, showing the fictional dimension of the set design and the collapse of the illusion created by the stage objects, which appear here in a new light.

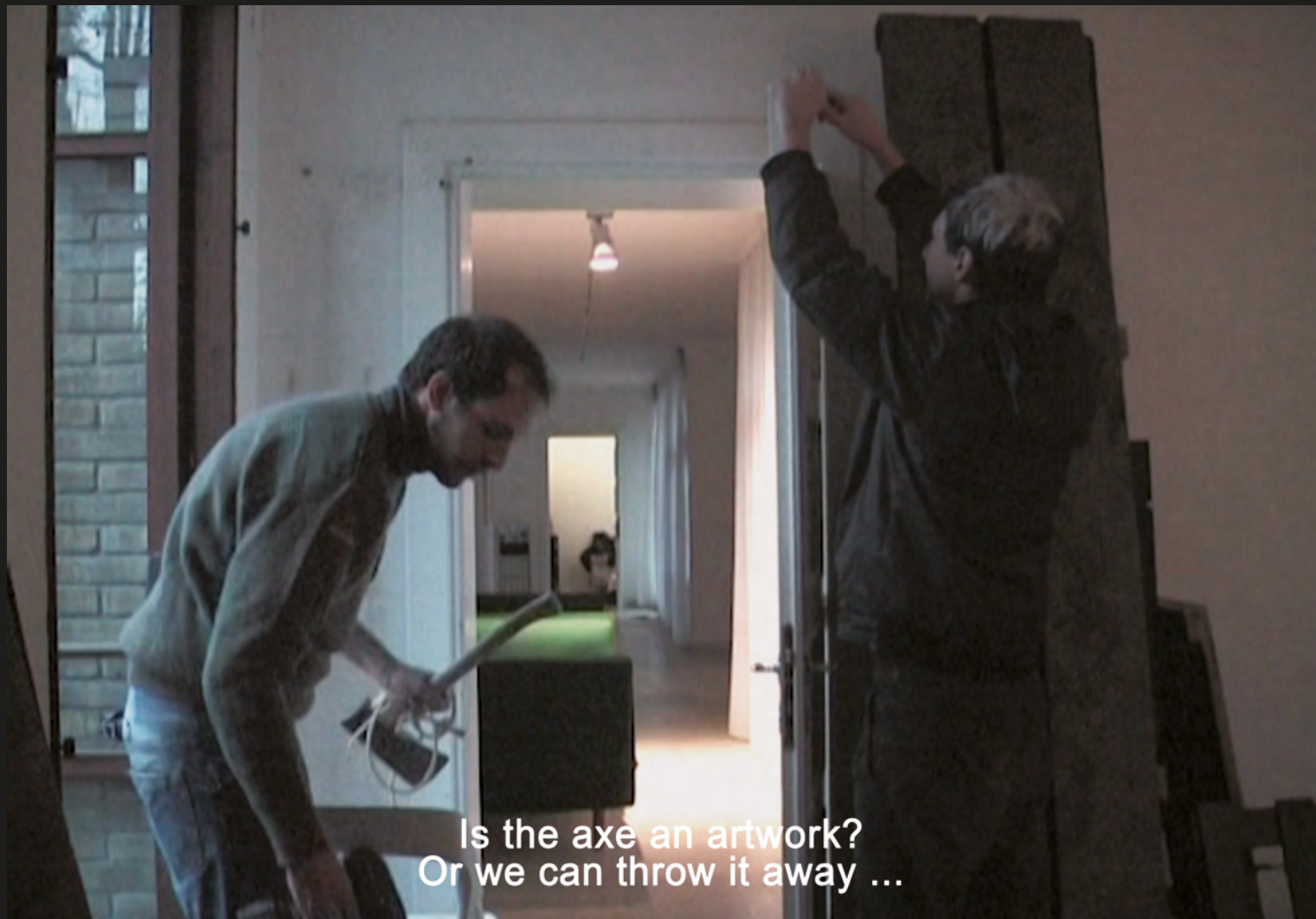
Filmed after the Biennale show, the work transitions the scene in which the audience was immersed during the exhibition into a stage of destruction.

The film's title references *Vargtimmen* (1968), also known as *Hour of the Wolf*, a work by Swedish director Ingmar Bergmann, whose vision served as an inspiration for Elmgreen & Dragset's project.

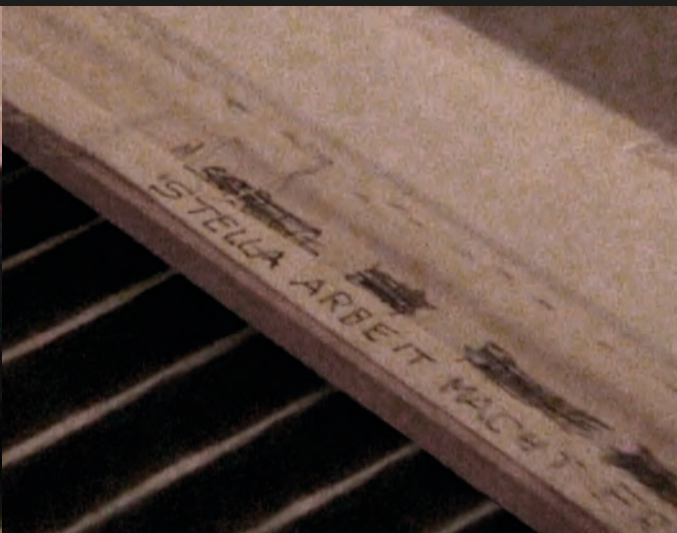


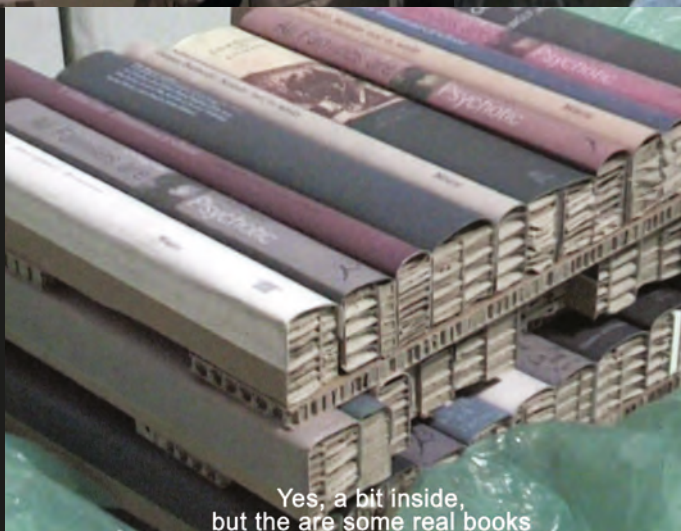




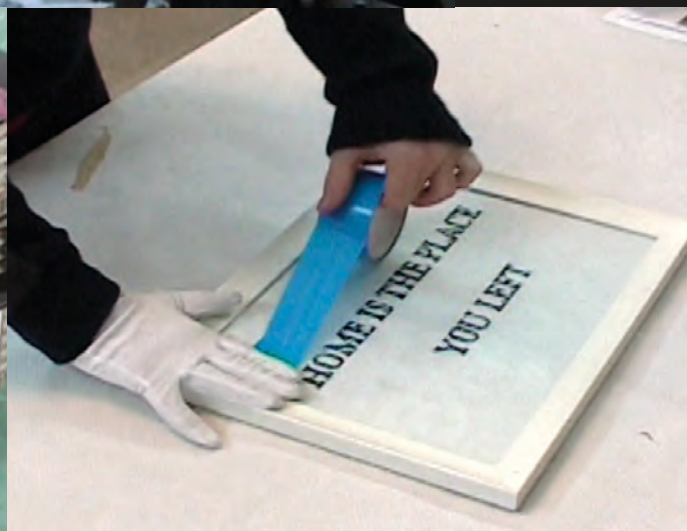


Is the axe an artwork?
Or we can throw it away ...



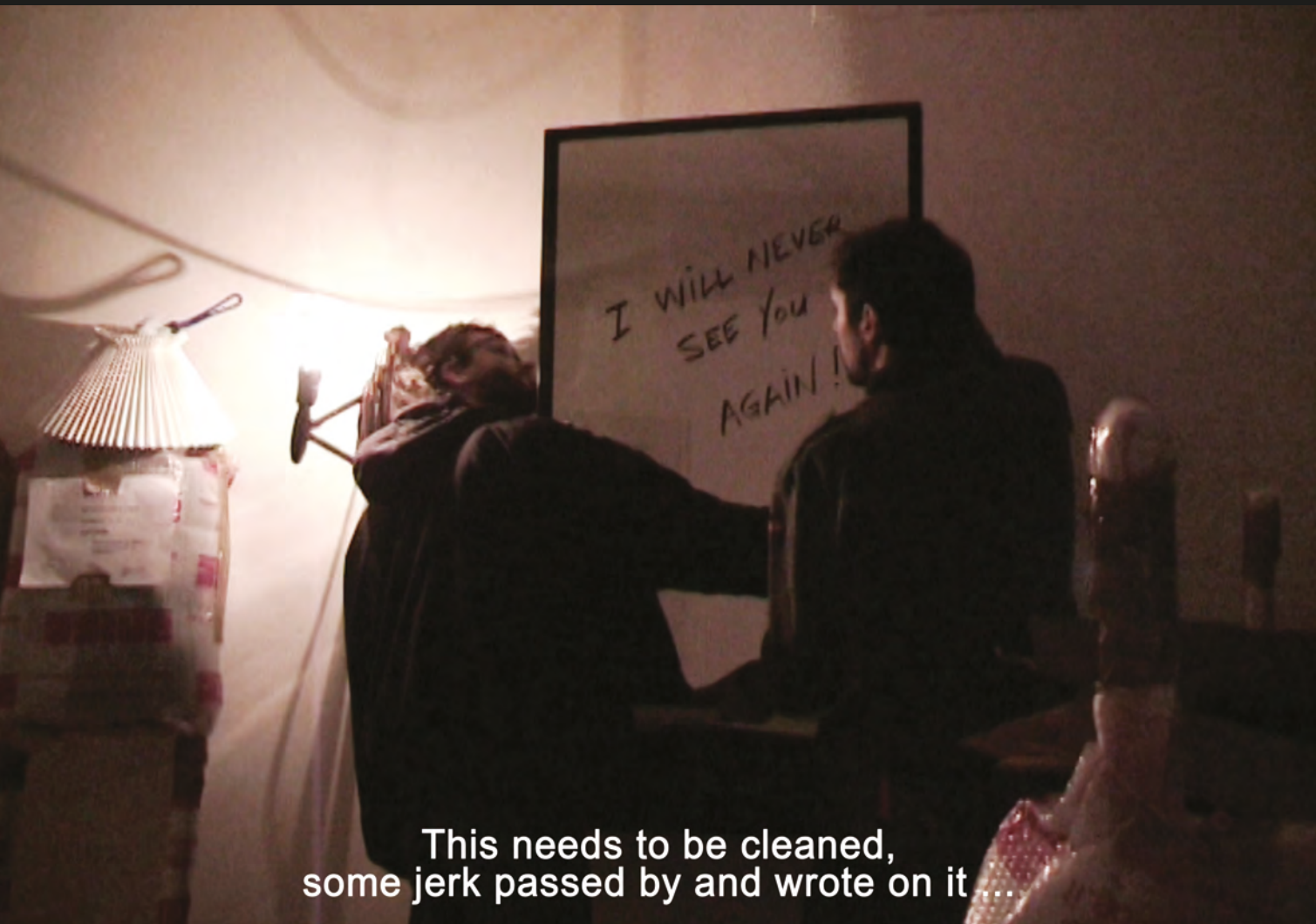


Yes, a bit inside,
but the are some real books





You can step on all of them.
This one for sure ... you can step on it



This needs to be cleaned,
some jerk passed by and wrote on it







There's styrofo



foam under ...

















CAPTIONS

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Film Stills from *Hour of the Wolf*, Film Mini Dv, Color/Sound, 2010. Courtesy the Artist

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Views of the projection room at the Danish Pavilion, Venice Biennale, Giardini Photo DT Studio, 2010

The first screening of *Hour of the Wolf* took place after the Biennale exhibition for a select audience, including the workers who dismantled the pavilions. Leftover materials from transport crates used for artworks from The Collectors exhibition at the Danish and Nordic Pavilions were repurposed as seating for the screening.

SELECTED GROUPS EXHIBITIONS

- 2014 *The Disappearance* (curated by Anca Rujoiu and Vera Mey), CCA – Center for Contemporary Art, Singapore (SG) with artists: Cyprien Gaillard, Mona Vatamanu&Florin Tudor, Malak Helmy, Diego Tonus, Marie Shannon
- 2014 *We Have Never Been Modern* (curated by Maria Rosa Sossai), SongEun ArtSpace, Seoul (Korea)
- 2013 *The 338 Hour Cineclub* (curated by Rosalie Doubal, Alec Steadman, Emeline Vincent), Fondazione Sandretto Re Rebaudengo, Turin (IT)
- 2013 *Add Fire* – 9th Edition of Furla Award (curated by Furla Foundation), Ex-Ospedale degli Innocenti, Bologna (IT)
- 2012 *Out-of-_____* (curated by Leila Khastoo), Michael Benevento Gallery, Los Angeles (US)
- 2015 *Refresh* with Ugo la Pietra and Rober Pettena (curated by Gabriele Tosi), Localedue, Bologna (IT)
- 2012 *Nounou; cage aux lions /deuxième partie* (curated by Eva Fabbris), Erg Galerie, Bruxelles (BE)
- 2011 *Global House Video Screenings*, 3rd Gwangju Biennale International Curator Course (directed by Ute Meta Bauer), Kunsthalle Gwangju, South Korea
- 2011 *Effetto Venturi: Hour of the Wolf* (curated by Peep Hole), Oberdan Theater, Milan (IT)

SELECTED SOLO EXHIBITIONS

- 2015 *Five Cases of Intrusion*, De Appel Arts Centre, Amsterdam (NL)
- 2011 *Hour of the Wolf*, Film projection at Danish Pavilion – Giardini Biennale, Venice (IT)

PUBLICATIONS

- Vv.Aa. (texts by Krist Gruijthuijsen, Gail Cochrane), *Diego Tonus. Five Cases of Intrusion*, Archive Books, Berlin, 2014
- AA.VV., *Add Fire* – Furla Award 2013, Mousse Publishing, Milan, 2013

SELECTED PRESS

- Travis Diehl (written by), “Los Angeles ‘Out-of-_____’”, *Artforum*, February 2012
- Abitare (written by), “Effetto Venturi - Peep Hole and Oberdan Theatre”, *Abitare*, Milan, May 2011
- Fondazione Sandretto Re Rebaudengo (curated by), “The 338 Hour Cineclub”, *FSRR*, Turin 2013
- Domus (curated by), “Add Fire: Premio Furla 2013”, *Domus*, February 2013
- Giulia Morucchio (curated by), “Diego Tonus. Five Cases of Intrusion”, *ATP Diary*, 2015