

## La Biennale Arte di Venezia – 60<sup>th</sup> International Art Exhibition

### *Stranieri Ovunque / Foreigners Everywhere*

*Curated by Adriano Pedrosa*

20<sup>th</sup> April to 24<sup>th</sup> November 2024

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*Photo 1* View of the Central Pavilion main facade with mural by MAHKU Collective (Movimento dos Artistas Huni Kuin), 2024, ‘Stranieri Ovunque’ – ‘Foreigners Everywhere’. Photo © 2024 Rui Goncalves Cepeda

The last time I got so excited with the possibility of travelling to Venice was just before my first time going to visit La Biennial di Venezia. This time, however, the reason for my enthusiasm lies in personal issues and historical affinities related with the Biennale Arte main focus: ‘Stranieri Ovunque’ (‘Foreigners Everywhere’). In “*estrangeiros em todos os lugares*” (in Portuguese), as was explained by MASP’ and Biennale Arte 2024’ Artistic Director, the Brazilian curator Adriano Pedrosa, the word ‘*estrangeiro*’ is etymologically linked to the notion of ‘*ser estranho*’. For Pedrosa, ‘*ser estranho*’ is to be queer, to be an outsider, to be an indigenous artist; the foreign is someone who is physically or conceptually displaced due to differences or disparities conditioned by identity, nationality, race, sexuality, liberty, wealth, believes, etc. (La Biennale di

Venezia, 2024) Narratives developed by those four subjects are the focus of the 60<sup>th</sup> La Biennale di Venezia – International Art Exhibition.

Several editions have passed since my first visit to the Biennale Arte. During the in-between years' I have been introduced to copious curatorial propositions which have presented creative spaces for reflection and revealed inherent cultural risks. Aesthetics propositions that have been critically confronted and dissected by people like us, the elitist and exclusive 'dark matter', to use Sholette astrophysical metonymy. With one exception, those have been curatorial propositions that have entered into obliviousness when in need to do a inclusive history of art. A cartography that is to be perceived beyond what is known as the Euro-American – known also as the Western civilization or the Global North – historical linear canon. Thus, when will be Euro-American art critics, curators, and historians willingly to delegate their fabricated authority to "foreigners" over the writing of a new canon for a global art history? The reason for my question is in that living in a democratic paradigm, diverse cultures of democracy are played on a multitude of levels and take a multiplicity of different relational forms. If the narrative of decolonisation is to be a two-ways exchange between the parties involved, when we include the 'foreign' discourse, it can no longer be a two-ways structural narrative; the new reality will transcend those limiting readings towards unimagined paths, and will become a marvellous entanglement.

According to the biennial curator "migration and decolonisation are key themes" of the Biennale Arte 60<sup>th</sup> edition (La Biennale di Venezia, 2024). Although, for instance, on the occasion of the 55<sup>th</sup> Biennale Arte, in 2013, entitle *Il Palazzo Enciclopedico* (The Encyclopaedic Palace), Germany and France have swapped pavilion buildings as a constructive international dialogue happening in the art world that was concerned with the meeting of cultural discourses, rather than keeping with the rigidity of national borders and divisions; and ten years before, in 2003, the Spanish artist, Santiago Sierra, covered the word 'Spain' in the Spanish pavilion, had security guards blocking the building' entrance, only allowing those with a Spanish passport to enter the space, and, consequently, view the exhibition – the same way I was also prevented from visiting his exhibition at a commercial exhibition gallery, in 2002, because that private space was closed to the public by corrugated metal. Together with migration and being foreign, the concept of the representation of the nation as a political construction and the

problematical nature of the capitalist economic project were paramount in both those two moments.

More recently, still, the 59<sup>th</sup> Venice Biennial, entitled *Milk of Dreams*, gave “voice to artists to create unique projects that reflected their visions and our society.” (La Biennale di Venezia, 2022) In a time of insidious climate of self-censorship by artistic and cultural institutions, the 59<sup>th</sup> edition could have been perceived as an accumulation of creative operations recognising the limitations of the common relationships distributed in and by the Global North. *Milk of Dreams* examined the underlying assumptions – with Euro-American allegiances – that might have appeared to be logical arguments related with the decolonisation of sex and gender believes, race or disability, cultural appropriation versus homage, climate change (but certainly no climate denying), rather than critically dealing with and rethinking the limitation of a structure of thought – the imperialism and colonialism of the Global North – while aiming to learn something new.

I would rather question, if it all depends of how much will the Global North allow the Global South to be decolonised, how will, more importantly, the Global North accept the Global South sovereign views (alternative or multiple) on governance, authority, and life. We can not talk about colonialism but, should, instead, start a discussion about inter-relationships between equivalent different parties played on an equalitarian multiplicity of levels. That seem to be what ‘Foreigners Everywhere’ is all about. A carefully choreographed sequence of curatorial propositions, lead by Adriano Pedrosa, that gives the finger to the prevalent one-sided canonical view of art history, as we all fall into an emotionally and tense argument on the structural conditions of art history. ‘Foreigners Everywhere’ is not to be perceived as a collective gathering of art works; it is one body constituted by art works conceived by artists who aimed to materialised their territorial creativity and inform about a particular condition, their everyday cultural and life, though a own cannibalising language. Not sure if it will be followed by an existential drift or it will have any impact beyond the realisation and confines of the Biennial in itself. What will come next is still open to discussion.



*Photo 2* View of main entrance to the Corderie in the Arsenale with Claire Fontaine, *Stranieri Ovunque (Foreigners Everywhere)*, 2004-24 (upper right) and Yinka Shonibare, *Refugee Astronaut VIII*, 2024 (front left), ‘Stranieri Ovunque’ – ‘Foreigners Everywhere’. Photo © 2024 Rui Goncalves Cepeda.

The title of this year edition ‘Stranieri Ovunque’ (‘Foreigners Everywhere’) is drawn from a series of works made, since 2004, by the Paris born and Palermo base collective Claire Fontaine. As described by Pedrosa, Claire Fontaine’s “work consists of neon sculptures in different colours that render in a growing number of languages the expression ‘Foreigners Everywhere’.” (La Biennale di Venezia, 2024) – Claire Fontaine’s series of neon sculptures is exhibited both at the entrance of the Central Pavilion in the Gardini and at the Corderie in the Arsenale (Photo 2) and as a large-scale installation at the Arsenale’s Gaggiandre. Pedrosa is opening, in this form, new discourses and alternative conversation. Emerging from different geographies, such as Latin America, Africa, and Asia, the untranslatable interpretation of certain images into other cultural ideals could be regarded as going through a process of cannibalism<sup>1</sup>; of being reterritorialised when the Euro-American structure of political imposition is

<sup>1</sup> In 1928, the Brazilian modernist, Oswald de Andrade, called to the critical, selective, and metabolising appropriation of Euro-American artistic tendencies, by artist from Latin America, of ‘anthropophagy’ or ‘cannibalism.’

replaced by foreign' structures of belief and rituals. In this case a Deleuzian deterritorialisation of the Euro-American' ideal is then followed by a reterritorialisation in to the foreign own system of belief and ritual, which can go beyond the pre-imperialist and pre-colonialist era.

In the Gardini, a monumental colourful painting experienced as an embodiment of the spirit of the Amazonian forest greets the public visiting the central building. The MAHKU collective (Movimento dos Artistas Huni Kuin) painted the story of *kapewë* (the alligator bridge), which describes the passage between the Asian and the American continents, on the neo-colonial white facade of the Central Pavilion (Photo 1). Beyond one other of Fontaine's series of neon sculptures, one of this year receivers of the Golden Lion for Lifetime Achievement, Nil Yalter (b. 1938 Egypt), combines two installations in the Central Pavilion first room that set the scene for Pedrosa curatorial proposition, while addressing the themes related with women's sexual liberation, the Orientalist objectification of Middle Eastern women, and people experiences through migratory movements. While in *Exile is a hard job* (1977-2024) her installation testifies to the challenges of migrant individuals, *Topak Ev* (1973) raises awareness to gender roles and societal norms confining women to domestic spaces. Alongside, at the Arsenal, the Māori Mataaho Collective, from New Zealand, welcome us with a multisensorial large-scale installation resembling a finely woven mat that embodies interconnectedness. *Takapau* (2022) addresses the manifestation of women's empowerment through the realities of indigenous communities.

It seems that both introductory rooms lead us to realise that this year Biennale Arte is not a celebration of the 'other', of the 'other's narrative and discourse. The 60<sup>th</sup> International Art Exhibition is, instead, focused on the 'estranho'; the Queer artist, who has moved within different sexualities and genders, often being persecuted or outlawed; the outside artist, who is located at the margins of the art world, much like the self-taught artist, the folk artist, and the 'artista popular'; and the indigenous and native artists, who are frequently treated as foreigner in their own land.

At continuation, those two room are the beginning of a journey that will take us through three main historical propositions – *Nucleo Storico / Ritratti* (Portraits), *Nucleo Storico / Astrazioni* (Abstractions), and *Nucleo Storico / Italiani Ovunque* (Italians Everywhere)

– and one *Nucleo Contemporaneo* (Contemporaneous). *Nucleo Contemporaneo* gathers works that are informed by the more than 300 artists about their own lives, experiences, reflections, narratives and histories. In here, for instances, the multiphase archive *Disobedience Archive*, developed by curator and art theorist Marco Scotini since 2005, is focused on the relationship between artistic practices and political action. *Disobedience Archive* encompasses hundreds of video and film images made by thirty-nine artists and collectives, between 1975 and 2023. This artwork functions as an atlas for art (diaspora) activism; as an ‘user’s guide’ to social (gender) disobedience.



*Photo 3* installation view of the room at the Central Pavilion (Gardini) with Kang Seung Lee (foreground) and Romany Eveleign (background) works, ‘Stranieri Ovunque’ – ‘Foreigners Everywhere’. Photo © 2024 Rui Goncalves Cepeda.

Most of the other rooms remarkably and thoroughly punctuate Predrosa’s curatorial proposition with disparate narratives about the foreign. Take for instance the room where Kang Seung Lee (b. 1978, Korea) extensive anthropological research, about the often overshadowed histories by the hegemonic art history, is paired to Romany Eveleign (b. 1934 United Kingdom, d. 2020 Italy) rich monochromatic abstract paintings and drawings drawn from her act of writing (Photo 3). While Seung Lee creates

environments that allow the visitor to reconfigure queer narratives in a transnational and transhistorical way, Eveleigh’ painting and drawings drawn from her visual vocabulary to produce pages of a written book – the repetition of the letter “o” – that do not communicate a message.



**Photo 4** Louis Fratino, *April (after Christopher Wood)*, 2024, ‘Stranieri Ovunque’ – ‘Foreigners Everywhere’. Photo © 2024 Rui Goncalves Cepeda.

At another room of the main exhibition, Louis Fratino (b. 1993, United States), presents paintings of male bodies in domestic spaces as a way to explore how LGBTQ+ people socialised as an ‘outsider’ (Photo 4). His paintings capture moments of intimacy and tenderness within everyday queer life, while juxtaposing tensions and contrasting emotional images of traditional family values with visceral homoerotic imagery. Whereas, an archival-based conceptual installation *The Museum of the Old Colony* (2024), by Pablo Delano (b. 1954 Puerto Rico), examines the Caribbean island five hundred years of colonial rule by highlighting, in particular, Delano culturally assess of the capitalist expropriation and racial hierarchy of his homeland – Puerto Rico – since US (un)incorporation. The most thought provoking work, though, will be Isaac Chong Wai (b. 1999 China) *Falling Reverse* (2021-2024) (Photo 5). Chong Wai

performance deals with acts of violence perpetuated globally, not only against the many Asian communities spread across the globe, but against the ‘foreign’ the ‘estranho’ as well. Through a combination of independent or collective choreographed movements he critically images an alternate relation to the conditions of being foreign, by suggesting that an individual’ fall can be supported and shielded by collective action.



*Photo 5* Performance view of Isaac Chong Wai, *Failing Reverseely*, 2021-24, ‘Stranieri Ovunque’ – ‘Foreigners Everywhere’. Photo © 2024 Rui Goncalves Cepeda.

It is worth remembering that, with very few exception, like the work of Yinka Shonibare (b. 1962 United Kingdom), Teresa Margolles (b.1963 Mexico), Kiluanji Kia Henda (b. 1979 Angola), or Bouchra Khalili (b. 1975 Morocco), for the more than 300 artists featured in this edition’ main exhibition this was the first time their work was presented at the Biennale Arte.

Paradoxically, within the context of the art world the word ‘foreigner’ can have different interpretations. the obvious reading is that ‘Foreigners Everywhere’ is not about the ‘other’, or the representations of the ‘other’s’ narratives. It can be about what exists outside societies’ established norms and rules through written and unwritten laws,



as Agamben's state of exception (following Carl Schmitt), or a Helguera's space of ambiguity, meaning, the (contemporary) art world; a second reading, thus, can be taken from within the contemporary art world, towards those characterised as being popular and indigenous artists who, usually, are placed at the margins of this same art world; a third reading can reflect upon those who have a more popular or folkloric vocation; another reading can be left to, essentially, what is too strange, as belonging to something or somewhere else that is not possible to characterise, the defined. This idea of characterisation, of definition lead me to the national pavilions.

With very few exceptions, the national pavilions remain as an entertaining distraction to the main conversation. Whenever I go to visit La Biennial di Venezia for personal and historical reasons. I find myself wanting to look at the Angola's pavilion, which on this edition was nowhere to be seen; Portugal's *Greenhouse* was closed every time I went to visit it; the Spanish pavilion is what it says it is, a 'Pinacoteca Migrante'; Mexico's pavilion is a combination of *Le Déjeuner sur l'Herbe*, but with a prudence that don't exist in the original version, mixed with a little of Maarten Bass' furniture design and Rachel Kneebone's ceramics; while, the British participation 'Listening All Night To The Rain', is as exciting as a PhD thesis. La Biennial di Venezia – International Art Exhibition is, foremost, a XIX century output of the idea associated with the expression of national representation within the imperialism and colonialism project. National identities are grouped into complex frameworks, each based on internal standardisation and on a common culture reflecting a sort of imaginary unity. The reduction to the XVIII century idea of a common unity is combined with the modernist ideal of a universal, rational consensus where nations compete amongst themselves to define the hegemonic canon to which to follow. Pavilions are physical structures that metaphorically express that ideal. Pavilions can be perceived as being comparable measures that can be used as thinking structures and in where ideas can flourish. Particularly, in relation to the rest of the world we need to consider that that relationship in the past centuries has been one of imperialism and colonialism of the Global North over the Global South.

For the artistic director of the 60<sup>th</sup> edition of Biennale Arte, the primary focus is the artistic dialogue that has been and is been articulated by those who have moved or have been moving across the Global South and the Global North. Regardless of what some

ideological groups tend to vindicate, historically we are all migrants living in foreign lands.

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**BIO:**

Rui has been working as a freelance art critic, curator, researcher and arts producer/manager for more than two decades. He has a MA in Cultural Studies from Goldsmiths College, University of London and a degree in Arts and Events Management from London Metropolitan University. His expertise crosses the fields occupied by arts and cultural management and production, the market for and contemporary art theory, as well as social criticism and participation, and epicure. He is the founder of the cross-cultures festival Trienal, a festival that brings together all those interests.