The essential Venice Biennale Guide 2019

Our expert recommendations, interviews and a pull-out map to help you navigate the art world’s biggest extravaganza

Biennale director Ralph Rugoff picks five artists to look out for pp XV-XVI
From prestige to passé?

National pavilions in Venice have long been criticised as anachronistic. But for nations newer to the event, just getting to the Biennale is an achievement. By Tim Cornwall

At each edition of the Venice Biennale, artists and curators set out to prove that the national pavilions are anachronism—the national shadow of a darker history in an era of a global market for art. Some artists' efforts have left their mark on the history of the Biennale, including Hans Haacke, who famously broke up the floor of the Nazis' German Pavilion in 1993, or the UK artist Mark Wallinger, who flew the Union Jack flag—in Ireland's colours—over the British Pavilion in 2001.

But questioning the purpose of the century-old tradition of having national pavilions, which dates back to 1902 when Belgium constructed the first foreign pavilion in Venice, may itself be an unequal luxury for the privileged few. For nations on the fringes, just getting to the Biennale is an achievement. Even at a time when Brexit looms and the policies of US President Donald Trump put nationalism squarely on the line, there is a double-standard as to who can afford to challenge the status quo.

"The whole point of Venice, unlike any other biennials, is that it is national," says Tamara Chalabi, the co-curator of Iraq's National Pavilion, Presented by the Royal Foundation. The country has had a pavilion in Venice since 2015, when its inaugural exhibition was simply titled "Welcome to Iraq." For the past four Biennales, the non-profit, non-governmental Royal Foundation has had to look and pay for a temporary space in Venice unlike the older, primarily Western, Biennale players that have guaranteed spaces with security and electrical supplies, as well as established galleries and artistic communities at home to support their Venice endeavor. "Interestingly, they are more able to question issues relating to nationalism," she says. "Venice is interesting because you can debate a lot of controversy from it, but from the point of view of Iraq, it is one of the few places we can be in it.

But for the Armenian artist Karen Boghosian, who represented his country in Venice in 2019, the national pavilions are not anachronisms. "I deeply believe there is an interesting aspect of the social or political identity of your country shown through art. Sometimes it is simply related to the artistic revolution and revolution of the (artists') country."

Boghosian's family foundation was one of the private supporters of artist and composer Zad Mustafah's project for Lebanon's Pavilion in 2017. But the Middle Eastern country will not be back in Venice this year. "I am not surprised to learn that Lebanon is not participating," Mustafah says. "The Lebanese government is not taking into consideration such an important event, unfortunately, art is not a priority to our politicians." Some nations ask questions of nationalism by looking beyond their traditional borders for artists. The organizers of the German and French presentations at the 2013 edition of the Biennale chose to host each other's artists in their respective pavilions.

National pride, national shame and the 'post-national': three pavilions exploring identity

Ghana

Ghana is making its Venice Biennale debut with a bold statement of national pride. In exhibition, Ghana's pavilion, named after the festival of singing the West Africa nation's independence from British colonial rule in 1957. It also honours the strength of its post-colonial diaspora, as two of the six participating artists—John Akomfrah and Yvonne Samuels—are based in the UK. The pavilion's designer, David Adjaye, is the architect of the planned National Cathedral of Ghana and the new museum in Accra, where the show will later travel.

Iraq

The Iraqi pavilion confronts the dark side of nationalism in the show 'Reflections on the Iraq-Jewish past: a New Era for the Iraqi Jewish Diaspora'. An interactive and engaging experience designed by artist and writer Khaled Abou El Fara, the exhibition examines the history of Iraq's Jewish community, from its expulsion in 1950 to the 2003 US invasion, and beyond. It includes an installation by Iraqi artist Marwan Rezki, which features a series of photographs depicting scenes from life in Iraq during and after the war.

The Netherlands

The "post national" presentation of the Netherlands, "The Measure of Presence," explores the role of nationalism in modern and contemporary art. The exhibition includes works by two of the country's most prominent artists, Daniel Steegmann Mangrané and Wim Vandekeybus. Steegmann Mangrané's "Syncopations" is a sculptural installation that examines the relationship between body and machine, while Vandekeybus's "The Garden of Forking Paths" is a large-scale multimedia installation that explores the concept of parallel universes.
National pavilions in Venice have long been criticised as anachronistic. But for nations newer to the event, just getting to the Biennale is an achievement. By Tim Cornwall

At each edition of the Venice Biennale, artists and curators set out to prove that the national pavilions are an anachronism – the nationalistic shadow of a darker history in an era of a global market for art. Some artists’ efforts have left their mark on the history of the Biennale, including Hans Haacke, who famously broke up the floor of the Nazi-era German Pavilion in 1993, or the UK artist Mark Wallinger, who flew the Union Jack flag – in Ireland’s colours – over the British Pavilion in 2001. But questioning the purpose of the century-old tradition of having national pavilions, which dates back to 1909 when Belgium constructed the first foreign pavilion in Venice, may itself be an unequal luxury for the privileged few. For nations on the fringes, just getting to the Biennale is an achievement. Even at a time when Brexit looms and the policies of US President Donald Trump put nationalism squarely on the line, there is a double-standard as to who can afford to quibble over identity.

“The whole point of Venice, unlike any other biennial, is that it is national,” says Tamara Chalabi, the co-curator of Iraq’s National Pavilion. Presented by the Ruya Foundation, the country has had a pavilion in Venice since 2013, when its inaugural exhibition was simply titled Welcome to Iraq.

For the past four Biennales, the non-profit, non-governmental Ruya Foundation has had to look and pay for a temporary space in Venice unlike the older, primarily Western, Biennale players that have guaranteed spaces with security and electrical supplies, as well as established galleries and artistic communities at home to support their Biennale endeavours. “Ironically, they are more able to question issues relating to nationalism,” she says. “Venice is interesting because you can derive a lot of controversy from it, but from the point of view of Iraq, it is one of the very few places we can be in.”

But for the Armenian artist Jean Boghossian, who represented his country in Venice in 2017, the national pavilions are not anachronisms: “I deeply believe there is an interesting aspect of the social or political identity of a country shown through art. Sometimes it is simply related to the artistic evolution and scenery of the [artist’s] country.”

Boghossian’s family foundation was one of the private supporters of artist and composer Zad Moultaka’s project for Lebanon’s Pavilion in 2017. But the Middle Eastern country will not be back in Venice this year. “I am not surprised to learn that Lebanon is not participating,” Moultaka says. “The Lebanese government is not taking into consideration such an important event; unfortunately, art is not a priority to our politicians.”

Some nations subvert questions of nationalism by looking beyond their traditional borders for artists. The Netherlands is exploring the ‘post-national’ title with the presentation of The Netherlands, The Measure of Presence, which is exhibited in Stoclet Palace, Brussels. The show is conceived in tribute to the Suriname-born artist Stanley Brouwn, who died in 2017.

Hannah McGivern

Ghana

Ghana is making its Venice Biennale debut with a bold statement of national pride. Its exhibition, Ghana Freedom, is named after the Highlife hit song celebrating the West Africa nation’s independence from British colonial rule in 1957. But it also channels the strength of its post-colonial diaspora, as two of the six participating artists – John Akomfrah and Lynette Yiadom-Boylie – are based in the UK. As is the pavilion’s designer, David Adjaye, the architect of the planned National Cathedral of Ghana and a new museum in Accra, where the show will later travel.

Iraq

The Iraq pavilion confronts the dark side of nationalism in the solo show Fatherland by the Iraqi-Kurdish painter Serwan Baran. Exercising his past experience as a conscript soldier and a war artist tasked with glorifying Iraqi military victories, Baran depicts army generals as brutal, nightmarish figures in new paintings and a life-sized sculpture. These images will be collaged with Iraqi military uniforms given by families of soldiers killed in the Iran-Iraq war, the second Gulf War and the war against Islamic State.

The Netherlands

The “post-national” presentation of the Netherlands, The Measure of Presence, deconstructs the Biennale’s legacies of nationalism and universal Modernism. Two artists of Surinamese descent, Remy Jungerman and Iris Eibl Kienholz, are making new works influenced respectively by the Afro-Suriname Winti religion and utopian black feminism, as well as by the Dutch Modern art movement De Stijl. The show is conceived in tribute to the Suriname-born artist Stanley Brouwn, who died in 2017.

Hannah McGivern