

SLEEK



ISSUE 62

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INFLUENCE: IT'S ALL IN YOUR HEAD

Millennial snowflakes
or unsung heroes:
Youth Activists Unite

Scammers, optimism
and hope

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Venice is Sinking

Text and images
by Benoît Loiseau

But are Biennials also in the deep?

With Venice likely to be underwater by the end of the century due to climate change, water is the hot topic of this year's Biennale. From contemporary renditions of the *Odyssey* to city-wide broadcasts about the unfathomable depths of the ocean, the subject has finally captured the imaginations of its curators. But will those in power take heed?

North of the Arsenale's main dock, across the central site of the Venice Biennale, sits a series of once decaying shipyards, vestiges of the Italian city's former trading and military glory. Now undergoing an expansive restoration scheme, the historic buildings are home to the MOSE (Experimental Electromechanical Module) control centre, facilitating the management of Venice's multi-billion euro system of mobile barriers, to prevent floods from rising sea levels. Inside, a desolate information centre houses a couple of poorly displayed maquettes, surrounded by piles of cardboard waste and lines of folding chairs, like the remnants of its long-departed, reluctant audience. Over the wall panels, the project's slogan 'Venezia Forever' rhetorically confesses the inevitable reality that the city is to be submerged by the end of the century, thanks to rising sea levels caused by global climate change.

"Right now, people think about saving Venice, but they are not specifying which Venice they want to save," oceanographer Georg Umgiesser tells me, when we meet at the adjacent Institute of Marine Sciences, where his research focuses on shallow water bodies. "There are really two Venices we have to save: the city and the lagoon." Like many other environmentalists and scientists, the German-born scientist has been an outspoken critic of the MOSE project, which he finds to be an unrealistic and money-draining system.

Initiated in 1987, MOSE consists of four mobile barriers which, when a high tide is forecast, temporarily separate the Venetian lagoon from the Adriatic Sea.

While the idea is scientifically sound, repeated budget overruns and delays (the launch is now scheduled for 2022, nearly a decade after original provisions) have attracted scrutiny and scepticism. With sea levels predicted to rise on average 50cm by 2100 according to the International Panel on Climate Change, the MOSE barriers would have to be shut the majority of the time in order to protect the city. This would seriously damage the ecosystem of the lagoon, which would change into "a different environment," explains Umgiesser. Instead, the scientist is advocating for complementary solutions, including the injection of water underneath the foundation of the city, to raise it above floodwater thresholds – a much cheaper and more sustainable alternative, he argues.

Like a lagoon, the Venice Biennale is a complex ecosystem in its own right, one which is increasingly disrupted by the financial interests of galleries and the advent of ever-more sophisticated global art fairs à la Art Basel and Frieze. Starting in 1895 as an artistic response to the 19th century trend of world fairs showcasing European nations' achievements in the glorious days of industrialisation, the Biennale grew from an Italian art exhibition, celebrating the silver anniversary of King Umberto I, to a truly international affair. From 1907, national pavilions started to spring up in the gardens of the Giardini, with Belgium leading the way. At the time, the concept of the art biennial moved away from centralised national control – an ironic turn, for a model which continues to rely on a now-outdated system of national representation.

"Venice was the first biennale, so it set up the terms of what it will be," says art historian Caroline A. Jones, a professor at Massachusetts Institute of Technology. "Those terms are never stable," she continues. Indeed, the model for regular, international art exhibitions has adopted different forms, as Jones remarks in her recent book *The Global Work of Art: World's Fairs, Biennials, and the Aesthetics of Experience*. Starting in 1951, the Biennial of São Paulo rejected the national pavilions model, instead proposing a curated group exhibition to position Brazil as an artistic centre – a strategy which, according to Jones, isn't all that different. "It's still a discourse marked by nations," she tells me during a phone conversation. "In some sense, how could it be otherwise ... The foundational structure is still coordinated by nations."

Today, amid the refugee crisis, global warming and the rise of populist politics, the Venice Biennale's system of national representation appears at best *démodé*, and at worst, profoundly inadequate. But pavilions have also become sites of contention, where the global order is at once scrutinised and subverted. This tradition started soon after the fall of the Berlin Wall, when, in 1993, German artist Hans Haacke famously smashed the German pavilion's marbled floor (which had been commissioned by Hitler) leaving the debris as the core element of the installation. This was the first time that a pavilion itself became the subject of such an enquiry, paving the way for other site-specific ruminations.

And water, unsurprisingly, has become a popular theme for artists to dabble in. This year, Luxembourg's site in Venice revisits Homer's *Odyssey* as a commentary on migration, while the Nordic pavilion tackles global warming and Joan Jonas inaugurates Venice's new Ocean Space centre for arts and marine conservation with a solo presentation at the church of San Lorenzo. Meanwhile, at the Institute of Marine Sciences' former headquarters, New Zealander artist Dane Mitchell has installed a 3-million-word list which names things that have vanished, from extinct species to former nations and destroyed art works. "It's an interesting poetic tool," Mitchell tells me of his project *Post hoc*, which broadcasts 25,000 words per day across the city through industrially produced tree cell towers. "To think about the way that humans consider the unknown ... The ocean as this enormous, unknowable mass."

Now, in a global art circuit ruled by financial speculation, political artistic positions can leave a bad taste in the mouth when set against the backdrop of Birkin bags and opulent palazzos. "I do think that the Biennale preserves itself as a place outside the market," insists Jones, recounting the moment when, following the students movement of 1968, the Venice Biennale shifted its status from commercial to non-profit. "They are positioning themselves as an alternative, where you can come and see difficult art, performances, or art that is an experience – all of these things are important to preserve in our artistic ecosystem."

But what's the good of preserving the Biennale's ecosystem if we can't preserve the foundational ecosystem of Venice? "Well, my idea is you can buy some years," says Umgiesser, after I reluctantly ask about La Serenissima's doomed future. "But you cannot save both things," he continues. "You cannot save the city and the lagoon together, you have to sacrifice one." If that's the case, wouldn't it be fair for the art world to sacrifice something too? The spectacle over the critical. Insider trading over audience engagement. Global abstractions over the site specific. Then again, can art really change the world? Well, you will hear different answers to that question. My favourite is that of American artist and AIDS activist Gregg Bordowitz, who once said to me that "art has the possibility of forming audiences of people who previously did not imagine that they shared common causes."

Two years ago, at the 57th Venice Biennale, French artist Paul Maheke installed a set of digitally-printed curtains at the Diaspora Pavilion – a timely contestation of the national pavilion system. Entitled *The River Asked for a Kiss (To Pateh Sabally)*, the work was part of a sculptural series referencing the suicide of a 22-year-old Gambian refugee who drowned in the Grand Canal after jumping from the Rialto Bridge earlier that year. It addressed non-human subjectivity and water memory; an obscure theory led by French Nobel laureate Luc Montagnier and largely ridiculed by the scientific community, claiming that water can carry information via an electromagnetic imprint from DNA and other molecules. I like that. However dark it might be, it feels comforting to think that, once submerged, the cultural memory of Venice will forever be inscribed in the neutral territory of water. Like the culminating promise of a global condition – but one we still have the power to change today.

