

Venice as a global camp of hope

Venice receives legal immigration of hundreds of signatures and flags from across the global art world every two years. The 58th art biennial hosts once again the general audience and all types of artwork, begging the question of who is more permanent and who is just fleeing in this world. The biennial, as an intellectual refugee camp playing hide and seek with reality, includes controversial works as well as a display of what is lacking in the world, is open for six months.

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The dubious “Chinese curse” of “May You Live in Interesting Times” actually refers to today’s extreme veracity. It is as if it was always uttered just for today; it was written and spoken for this moment. It even made the rounds for decades, told by figures including the science-fiction writer Arthur C. Clarke and the politician Hillary Rodham Clinton. [1]

This is cunning. Because there is no such curse. But it also appears to exist because it has been carried over, traveling from ear to ear. Perhaps it is an indication that today’s reality is very weak, fleeting, erasable—it is a mark of the cynically cunning. Furthermore, the main sponsor of the biennial is a Swiss watch brand, merging art and time, further legitimizing this situation.

The 58th Venice Biennial—with its narrow streets where it is difficult to get lost, surprisingly, the tilted towers, the domes, a marked uncertainty of whether the city is sinking or floating—takes this questionable yet official conceptual framework as a departure point, chasing after the truth. Hundreds of desperate people who are violently “zapping” through their perceptions, transformed into live broadcast stations with their phones, are strangely frenzied. I was subjected to the incredibly hurried preview alongside hundreds of people; the theme of the biennial resonates as fully subjective, speculative, and propagandist.

Venice—marketing to the world the question of whether your masked state or the mask itself is the truth, where every second can be measured in euros. An amusement park for adults. A circus of people. An old political poster about a civilian protest from the beginning of May on a historic wall outside of the official biennial spaces catches my eye. I took a photograph of this poster: *‘Tourist Go Home / ‘Refugees Welcome’*.

The artistic director of this rendition of the Venice Biennial is Ralph Rugoff, the director of the Hayward Gallery in London, born in New York, USA (*so in other words, a white-collared immigrant*). I try to look at the biennial from a voluntarily bent perspective just like the one advised by the poster and ask myself:

Is the Biennial a place flocked every two years by global culture tourists, accredited, wearing both white and colorful collars? Does this place have its own first (Giardini/Garden), second (Arsenale/Armory) and third-class social compartments (the back streets of Venice and spread across private spaces outside of the first two), annoying for the locals, but without whom cash registers are not full? A privileged, huge “entertainment cruise”? Or is the biennial, with its temporary “national” or “thematic” or “unofficial” spaces an organic, global immigrant market of arts and culture, a meeting place that has been ongoing for over a hundred years?

To be able to answer these questions, I return to my original reason for coming here, the biennial. I encounter the artist Andreas Lolis’s work, one of the artists included in the main exhibition; his work is at the entrance of the main exhibition at the Giardini on the right, an installation with black garbage bags and trash cans and his work at the Arsenale is a tired

bench and a blanket cradled by the walking path with trees at the Arsenale. Lolis is Albanian. He is 48-years-old. But he lives and works in Athens—as they say, not where he was born, but where he can work. So, in other words, he has a “colorful” collar, an intellectual European immigrant. He is free, he is democratically a “Schengen-er”¹.



Andreas Lolis, İsimsiz,
2018
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Neighboring Lolis is another cultural immigrant born in Mardin-Sürgücü, Halil Altındere, who lives and works in Istanbul. Our eyes, our broken smiles have been with him and his treatment of issues of boundaries and the breaking of boundaries since his work included in the Istanbul Armory (1997, Dancing with Taboos, 5th Istanbul Biennial).

Altındere, selected by Rugoff with three different projects, is exhibiting his works at the Giardini, the Arsenale, and with posters hung across Venice. Altındere, who often uses his sharp, witty use of contemporary art with a humorist gravitas, takes on Banksy’s 2015 dystopic Disneyland, “Dismaland”—a monument² of dark humor—placing “Neverland” at the Giardini. This is the remains of a pavilion, not able to belong to neither the Giardini nor the Arsenale, the front and the back in their own worlds, sincerely stuck in-between. It is the mummification of an immigrant positioning. The front and back residues of a dream unfinished. Altındere encourages us to contemplate on the construction of representation and its hollowness through this work.

The artist’s installation, dedicated to the only Syrian cosmonaut who went to space (in 1987), Muhammed Ahmet Faris, who continues to live in Turkey as a refugee, spreads a cosmic absurdity in the Giardini; Altındere launched his installation into the skies above Venice, presenting an “international” view on the issues of Mars and colonization. Altındere dealt with the issue relying on the expertise of lawyers, architects, and scientists, almost as an investigative journalist would. His final and golden blow to the comedy of institutionalization in Turkey is the biennial poster-caricature “First Inter-galactic Art Biennial”.

The issue of asylum-refugees-immigration has been a topic in contemporary art for a long time. If we look at specific examples, popular artists have been working on this issue without any reservations: Banksy who has been through Venice did the wall sign for the *Anonymous*

¹ translator’s note: The writer plays on the word Schengen’e, which sounds like Çingene, the Turkish word referring to the nomadic gypsies.

² translator’s note: The writer plays on the words mizah (humor) and izah (explanation).

Stateless Immigrants Pavillion in 2011. Ai Weiwei made an immigration documentary including 23 different countries, shown at the Venice Film Festival in 2017 called the *Human Flow*. Within this context, the issue of when and how we should laugh and when and how we should be emotional can also be the grounds for a sincere and serious atmosphere as is the case with the Canadian pavilion, where, for the first time, Inuit first nation artists, including the artist Kunuk, were exhibited; this gesture perhaps served as an “apology” to the Inuits who live as the “other” in their own homeland.



Halil Altın-
dere, Never-
land. 2019
© Haupt &
Binder

Venice is a refugee camp for immigrant images, sounds, surfaces as the Biennial Director Paolo Baratta points out and every viewer becomes an active element in the fleeting-migrating truth. [2] Lawrence Abu Hamdan, who lives and works in Beirut, Lebanon, and who was born in Amman, Jordan in 1985, transmits random mobile images of Syrian immigrants to the Arsenale (*This Whole Time There Were No Landmines*, 2017). Sharing the same space at the main exhibition is the vast civilian, anonymous global road signs of Slavs & Tatars. The same kindness and loyalty are exhibited by the artist Yamandu Canosa with the work *La Casa Empatica* (The Emphatic House) in the Giardini Uruguay Pavilion. The artist mimicked the same horizon line using many different aesthetic departure points, including the Eastern, Western, Northern, and Southern walls. This naive installation brings together the simple with the opulent, making visible that we can meet at a shared sensibility.

The most provocative work in the biennial, both because of its location and its story, is a work by Christoph Büchel (b. 1966); the Swiss-Icelandic artist is well-known for his provocative installations and his hyper-realistic older works. Four years ago, as part of the Icelandic pavilion, he added a mosque to the urban texture of Venice, which was closed by the Biennial administration when the mosque became too full during the Friday prayers; Büchel is a radical, provocative, immigrant artist.

Büchel deals with a diverse set of issues in his works including ecology, economy, the mass identity crisis, the social climate issues, now bringing to the Arsenale the “Barca Nostra” [Our Ship], the remains of a ship. The artist was supported by the officials in Sicily; he brought a refugee ship that sunk because of an accident 96 kilometers from the Libyan coast as a Trojan horse, hanging it with a crane in front of the biennial cafes.

This crane action is a lynching act against humanity's callousness; many professionals in the artistic and cultural sectors have been disturbed by the work, saying that the artist has gone too far again and that the work has a top-down perspective, as if there is no culpability. Just to remind the reader of the details, the ship was approaching a Portuguese ship to seek help and there was a collision. There were approximately 700 to 1100 African immigrants on board and only 28 survived.

As it is emphasized in the official catalogue of the biennial, Italian Prime Minister Matteo Renzi had also proposed in 2016 for the ship to be transported to the European Parliament in the Belgian capital Brussels to be put on display there as a case in point. There were even proposals to have the ship tour in Europe in reference to the freedom of movement as a human right. [3] Büchel had exhibited a vast installation at the Municipal Museum of Contemporary Art in Ghent (SMAK) and had transformed a section of the museum into a refugee camp where the refugees were accompanied by artworks (2015). This work also reminds me of Banu Cennetoğlu's work-project "List" (2006-), exhibited in Istanbul, Sofia, Amsterdam, Bonn, Milan, Berlin, Los Angeles, and in Liverpool, where the work was vandalized and reinstated after the vandalism. [4]

In terms of the issues of immigration, lacking, missing a place, a homeland, I was struck the most by the abandoned pavilion of Venezuela at the Giardini—due to the economic and political upheavals in their homeland, they were not able to participate at the Biennial. The floor of the pavilion is dusty, there is a rake leaning against the wall, probably left over from the previous biennial, a few traces of artworks washed over with the bright daylight. Who is the de facto curator of this pavilion? Trump? Maduro? Guaido? As I left the sincere, dramatic, lamenting silence of the Venezuelan pavilion, my eyes linger on the plant that was becoming a tree despite the concrete, holding onto the walls of the building. I stop questioning who is latching on to whom and for what reason—just like the sincere, truthful leaves of that tree, feelings as strong as concrete burgeon inside of me.



Christoph Büchel, Barca Nostra, 2018-2019

- (1) Ralph Rugoff's introductory text to the 58th Venice Biennial, pg.36.**
- (2) The introductory text of Paolo Baratta, the Director of the Venice Biennial, quoted from the catalogue**
- (3) Barca Nostra, Arsenale, Christoph Büchel work analysis, biennial catalogue, pg.60**
- (4) <http://www.list-e.info/liste-hakkinda.php?l=en>**

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