

Artists get political at the 2019 Venice Biennale

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Artist Amina Zoubir at The Venice Biennale

The 2019 Venice Biennale has asked artists to step into the socio-political realm, in the middle of far-right Matteo Salvini's Italy. And they have done it, dismantling Orientalism and getting the Mediterranean closer together in the process.

In the current period of massive migration across the Mediterranean, the role of culture is to highlight common values held by different people. Art can indeed open up in their hearts a space and the possibility for peaceful coexistence.

In Italy, a country in the grip of Salvini's anti-migration rhetoric, this cultural labour of love is of utmost importance. At the moment, fear is taking over a large part of the population. This is certainly not a time of "art for art's sake". As far as the 2019 Venice Biennale is concerned, "interesting times" calls for "interesting artists".

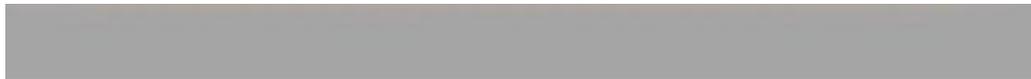
This month, there is no better litmus test than this pivotal art event. At the Giardini and Arsenale — the two locations for the Biennale — we saw disengagement as the main trend just two years ago. Called "Viva Arte Viva", the previous edition of the Biennale was meant to be a celebration of the joy of art expression, but it resulted in a mere showcase of conceptualism. It was criticised badly, which was perhaps a reaction to the highly political premise of the 56th edition four years ago, curated by Nigeria's Okwui Enwezor.

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Titled *May You Live in Interesting Times*, the 2019 Biennale doesn't shy away from the uncertainty, crisis and turmoil in which we find ourselves. The title itself comes from a speech given in the late 1930s by British MP Austen Chamberlain, in which he cited what had wrongly been understood as an ancient Chinese curse.

Right off the bat, there is a critique of Orientalism. Ralph Rugoff, curator of the Venice Biennale, spelled it out clearly by pointing out that, despite the fact that this "ancient Chinese curse" never actually existed, Western politicians kept referencing it for years. "It is an Occidental 'Orientalism,'" notes the curator, "and yet for all its fictional status it has had real rhetorical effects in significant public exchanges."





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In the concept for the Biennale, Rugoff highlights the role of artists. Although art can't stop the rise of nationalism and authoritarianism all on its own, or directly help those who have been displaced, it can have an indirect effect. An artist can become a guide for how to live and think in “interesting times”.

And then there is another tendency which is amplified in this edition. Traditionally, the Biennale was a model for a division in National Pavilions, but this year it is set to transcend nationalism, and get the Mediterranean population closer together. In this, the Biennale is joining the voices of the [MAXXI Museum](#) in Rome and the [independent festival](#) scattered around the peninsula and the islands creating an antidote for the aforementioned culture of fear.

A case in point is the Malta Pavilion, presenting the island as the cultural centre of the Mediterranean Sea, both in history and in current times. Titled “Maleth / Haven / Port – Heterotopias of Evocation”, the Pavilion is curated by Dr Hesperia Iliadou Suppiej and presents the works of Vince Briffa, Klitsa Antoniou, Trevor Borg and Perit Matthew Joseph Casha.

Borg's work *Cave of Darkness– Port of No Return* proposes a mystical journey of surprise and self-inquiry. The viewer navigates through the pre-historic layers of Malta in the footsteps of its earliest inhabitants and their final end. The work is an exploration of entrapment concealed within a safe haven; it is such a powerful metaphor of our times.

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A multi-screen projection by Vince Briffa, *OUTLAND*, is inspired by Homer's *Odyssey*. It uses the myth of Calypso and Ulysses to reinterpret, in contemporary imagery and sound, the duality of the character of Calypso, as lover and oppressor, as she offers a haven for Ulysses during the seven years that he was harboured in her cave. The metaphor for the duality of the migrants' journey at sea seems stronger than ever.

Perhaps one of the most striking works is a multi-media installation by Klitsa Antoniou, which is based on the “Atlantropa scheme”. This was a gigantic engineering and colonisation concept devised by German architect Herman Sorgel in the 1920s, in which he proposed to partially drain the Mediterranean to create a European supercontinent. The viewer is left to ask what would happen today if this proposal was ever realised.

During the Biennale, there is a collateral show with reflections bringing us a step closer towards considering the artist's role in these emergency times for the Mediterranean Sea and the populations on its shores. The exhibition is, tellingly, called: "Artists Need to Create on the Same Scale that Society Has the Capacity to Destroy: Mare Nostrum". It features 73 artists of international backgrounds whose works are a response to both migration and the environmental issues that the sea is experiencing. Organised by the group and magazine *Brooklyn Rail*, the show is animated by an interdisciplinary programme titled "1001 Stories for Survival", which will include free public conversations with artists, scientists and writers, musical performances and poetry readings.

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There is also a not-to-be-missed exhibit, in place of the absent Algeria Pavilion, which was withdrawn because of the latest political turmoil in the North African country. Called "Time To Shine Bright, History of a Pavilion, Algerian Artists During La Biennale Arte Di Venezia" and curated by Hella Mahmoud, the show is happening in spite of everything, thanks to artists who organised themselves and rebelled against the status quo.

This important exhibition focuses on the role of cultural producers, looking at how artists are acting out the people's resilience, shining a light for us all in the darkness of our times. It calls on the concept of resilience as an answer in response to any revolution. To the curator, artists are the people who need to elicit the "impetus so sorely missed over these last years."

This perspective echoes the words of Biennale's curator Ralph Rugoff. He declared that what is most important about an exhibition is not what it puts on display but rather how audiences can use their experience of the exhibition afterwards to confront everyday realities from expanded viewpoints and with new energy.

The views expressed in this article belong to the author and do not necessarily reflect the editorial policy of Middle East Monitor.