

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

Statement by **Adriano Pedrosa**  
*Curator*



## Stranieri Ovunque - Foreigners Everywhere

The title of the 60<sup>th</sup> International Exhibition of La Biennale di Venezia is drawn from a series of works made by the Paris-born and Palermo-based collective Claire Fontaine since 2004. The works consist of neon sculptures in different colors that render in a growing number of languages the expression “Foreigners Everywhere”. The expression was in turn appropriated from the name of a collective from Turin that in the early 2000s fought racism and xenophobia in Italy: *Stranieri Ovunque*. There are currently some 53 languages in Claire Fontaine’s series of neon sculptures, both western and non-western, including several indigenous languages, some that are in fact extinct—they will be exhibited at the Biennale Arte this year in a new, large-scale installation in the iconic Gaggiandre shipyards in the Arsenale.

The backdrop for the work is a world rife with multifarious crises concerning the movement and existence of people across countries, nations, territories and borders, which reflect the perils and pitfalls of language, translation, nationality, expressing differences and disparities conditioned by identity, nationality, race, gender, sexuality, freedom, and wealth. In this panorama, the expression *Foreigners Everywhere* has several meanings. First of all, that wherever you go and wherever you are you will always encounter foreigners—they/we are everywhere. Secondly, that no matter where you find yourself, you are always truly, and deep down inside, a foreigner. In addition, the expression takes on a very particular, site-specific meaning in Venice: a city whose original population consisted of refugees from Roman cities, a city that was at one point the most important centre for international trade and commerce in the Mediterranean, a city that was the capital of the Republic of Venice, dominated by Napoleon Bonaparte, and taken over by Austria, and whose population today consists of about 50,000 residents that may reach 165,000 in a single day during peak seasons due to the enormous number of tourists and travelers—foreigners of a privileged kind—visiting the city. In Venice, foreigners *are* everywhere. Yet one may also think of the expression as a motto, a slogan, a call to action, a cry— of excitement, joy or fear: *Foreigners Everywhere!* More importantly, it assumes a critical signification today in Europe, around the Mediterranean and in the world, when the number of forcibly displaced people hit the highest in 2022, at 108.4 million according to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, and is expected to have grown even more in 2023.

Artists have always traveled and moved about, under various circumstances, through cities, countries and continents, something that has only accelerated since the late 20<sup>th</sup> century—ironically a period marked by increasing restrictions regarding the dislocation or displacement of people. The Biennale Arte 2024’s primary focus is thus artists who are themselves foreigners, immigrants, expatriates, diasporic, émigrés, exiled, or refugees—particularly those who have moved between the Global South and the Global North. Migration and decolonization are key themes here.

The Italian *stranieri*, the Portuguese *estrangeiro*, the French *étranger*, and the Spanish *extranjero*, are all etymologically connected to the *strano*, the *estranho*, the *étrange*, the *extraño*, respectively, which

is precisely the stranger. Sigmund Freud's *Das Unheimliche* comes to mind—the *uncanny* in English, which in Portuguese has indeed been translated as “*o estranho*”—the strange that is also familiar, within, deep down side. According to the American Heritage and the Oxford Dictionaries, the first meaning of the word queer is *strange*, and thus the Exhibition unfolds and focuses on the production of other related subjects: **the queer artist**, who has moved within different sexualities and genders, often being persecuted or outlawed; **the outsider artist**, who is located at the margins of the art world, much like the self-taught artist, the folk artist and the *artista popular*; as well as **the indigenous artist**, frequently treated as a foreigner in his or her own land. The productions of these four subjects are the interest of this Biennale Arte, constituting the International Exhibition's *Nucleo Contemporaneo*, and although their work is often informed by their own lives, experiences, reflections, narratives and histories, there are also those who delve into more formal issues with their own strange, foreign or indigenous accent.

Indigenous artists have an emblematic presence in the International Exhibition, and their work greets the public in the Central Pavilion, where the Makhu collective from Brazil will paint a monumental mural on the building's façade, and in the Corderie in the Arsenale, where the Maataho collective from Aotearoa—New Zealand will present a large-scale installation in the first room, two other iconics locales in the exhibition. Queer artists appear throughout the exhibition, and are also the subject of a large section in the Corderie, which gathers works by artists from Canada, China, India, Mexico, Pakistan, the Philippines, South Africa, and the USA, and one devoted to queer abstraction in the Central Pavilion, with works by artists from China, Italy, and the Philippines. From Europe, three of its most remarkable female outsider artists are presented: Madge Gill, from the United Kingdom, Anna Zemánková, from the Czech Republic, and Aloïse, from Switzerland.

The *Nucleo Contemporaneo* will feature a special section in the Corderie devoted to the Disobedience Archive, a project by Marco Scotini, which since 2005 has been developing a video archive focusing on the relationships between artistic practices and activism. In the Biennale Arte 2024, the presentation of the Disobedience Archive is designed by Juliana Ziebell, who also worked in the exhibition architecture of the entire International Exhibition. The section is divided into two parts especially conceived for our framework, *diaspora activism* and *gender disobedience*, and will include works by 39 artists and collectives made between 1975 and 2023.

The International Exhibition will also feature a *Nucleo Storico* gathering works from 20<sup>th</sup> century Latin America, Africa, the Middle East and Asia. Much has been written about global modernisms and modernisms in the Global South, and a number of rooms will feature works from these territories, much like an essay, a draft, a speculative curatorial exercise that seeks to question the boundaries and definitions of modernism. We are all too familiar with the histories of modernism in Euroamerica, yet the modernisms in the Global South remain largely unknown. Knowledge about these is limited to the specialists in each individual country or region at best, yet connecting and exhibiting these works together will be revealing. It is this sense that these histories assume a truly contemporary relevance—we urgently need to learn more about and from them. Additionally, European modernism travelled far beyond Europe throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century, often intertwined with colonialism, and many artists in the Global South traveled to Europe to be exposed to it. In this process, modernism was appropriated and devoured in the Global South. The reference here is to Oswald de Andrade's notion of *antropofagia*, offered as a tool to the modern intellectual at the margins of Europe to appropriate metropolitan culture, cannibalizing it and producing something of his or her own, and evoking the cannibalistic practice of the indigenous

Tupinambá people in pre-invasion Brazil. The unique, distinct types of modernism around the Global South assume radically new figures and forms as they often dialogue with local and indigenous narratives and references.

Three rooms are planned for the *Nucleo Storico*, with one work by each artist, mostly paintings but also works on paper and sculpture, spanning the years of 1905 and 1990. It is difficult to establish a strict overarching chronology here, as the processes may be quite singular in each country or region, often following their own idiosyncratic courses. In the Central Pavilion, one room is devoted to portraits and representations of the human figure and a second one devoted to abstractions.

The double-room named *Portraits*, includes works by 112 artists from Algeria, Aotearoa—New Zealand, Argentina, Bolivia, Brazil, Chile, China, Colombia, Cuba, Dominican Republic, Ecuador, Egypt, Ghana, Guatemala, India, Indonesia, Iran, Iraq, Jamaica, Korea, Lebanon, Malaysia, Mexico, Mozambique, Nigeria, Pakistan, Peru, Philippines, Puerto Rico, Singapore, South Africa, Sri Lanka, Sudan, Tunisia, Turkey, Uruguay, Venezuela, Vietnam, and Zimbabwe. The selection shows how the human figure has been explored in countless different ways by artists in the Global South, reflecting on the crisis of representation around the that very figure that marked much of the art in 20<sup>th</sup> century art. In the Global South, many artists were in touch with European modernism, through travels, studies or books, yet they bring in their own highly personal and powerful reflections and contributions to their works. Most works depict non-white characters, which in Venice, at the heart of the Biennale, becomes an eloquent feature of this large and heterogenous group and the Exhibition itself.

The room devoted to *Abstractions* includes works by 37 artists from Argentina, Aotearoa—New Zealand, Brazil, Colombia, Cuba, Dominican Republic, Egypt, Guatemala, India, Indonesia, Iraq, Jordan, Lebanon, Mexico, Morocco, Pakistan, Palestine, Philippines, Puerto Rico, South Africa and Turkey. A key reference here is the extraordinary Casablanca School of painters from Morocco, some of which will be presented at the Biennale for the first time. What is of interest here is a certain type of abstraction that detaches itself from the European constructivist abstract geometric tradition, with its rigid orthogonal grid of verticals and horizontals and its palette of primary colors, in order to privilege more organic, curvilinear shapes and forms, bright and vivid colors, in striking compositions.

Most of these artists are being exhibited together for the first time, and we will learn from these unforeseen juxtapositions in the flesh, which will then hopefully point towards new connections, associations, and parallels much beyond the rather straightforward categories that I have proposed. Although not technically part of the Global South any longer, artists from Singapore and Korea have been brought into these sections, given that at the time they were part of the so-called Third World. In a similar manner, Selwyn Wilson and Sandy Adsett, from Aotearoa — New Zealand, have been brought into this *Nucleo Storico* given that they are historical Maori artists, and the focus on indigenous artists. With the inclusion of the vast majority of these artists in the *Nucleo Storico* at the Biennale Arte for the first time, a historical debt is paid to them.

A third room in the *Nucleo Storico* is dedicated to the worldwide Italian artistic diaspora in the 20<sup>th</sup> century: Italian artists who travelled and moved abroad developing their careers in Africa, Asia, Latin America, as well as in the rest of Europe and the United States, becoming embedded in local cultures—and who often played significant roles in the development of the narratives of modernism beyond Italy. This room will feature works by 40 artists who are first or second

generations Italians, exhibited in Lina Bo Bardi's glass easel display system (Bo Bardi herself an Italian who moved to Brazil, and who won the 2021 Biennale Architettura's Special Golden Lion for Lifetime Achievement in Memoriam).

Two quite different but related elements have emerged rather organically in the research and have been developed, appearing as leitmotifs throughout the International Exhibition. The first one is textiles, which have been explored by many artists in the show in multiple, from key historical figures such as Olga de Amaral, Eduardo Terrazas, and Monika Correa in the *Nucleo Storico*, to many artists in the *Nucleo Contemporaneo*, including Agnes Waruguru, Ahmed Umar, Anna Zemánková, Antonio Guzman and Iva Jankovic, the Bordadoras de Isla Negra, Bouchra Khalili, Claudia Alarcon & Silät, Dana Awartani, Frieda Toranzo-Jaeger, Günes Terkol, Kang Seung Lee, Liz Collins, the Mataaho Collective, Nour Jaouda, Pacita Abad, Paula Nicho, Sangódáre Gbádégesin Ajàla, Shalom Kufakwatenzi, Susanne Wenger, Yinka Shonibare, as well as in the Chilean *arpilleristas*. These works reveal an interest in craft, tradition, and the handmade, and in techniques that were at times considered other or foreign, outsider or strange in the larger field of fine arts.

A second motif is family of artists, artists related by blood, many of them Indigenous—such as Andres Curruchich and his granddaughter Rosa Elena from Guatemala; Abel Rodriguez and his son Aycoboo from Colombia; Fred Graham and his son Brett, Maori artists from Aotearoa — New Zealand; Juana Marta and her daughter Julia Isidrez from Paraguay; the Mahku, Movimento dos Artistas Huni Kuin, the Huni Kuin collective from the western part of the Brazilian Amazon region; Joseca and Taniki Yanomami, from the northern part of the same region; Santiago Yahuarcani and his son Rember from Peru; Susanne Wenger and her adopted son Sangódáre Gbádégesin Ajàla from Nigeria, the brothers Philomé and Senèque Obin from Haiti, and Jewad and Lorna Selim, the husband and wife from Iraq and the UK. Again tradition plays an important role here—the transmission of knowledge and practices from father or mother to son or daughter or among siblings and relatives.

As a guiding principle, the Biennale Arte 2024 has favored artists who have never participated in the International Exhibition—though a number of them may have been featured in a National Pavilion, a Collateral Event, or in an edition in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Special attention is being given to outdoor projects, both in the Arsenale (with works by Anna Maria Maiolino, Beatriz Cortez, Claire Fontaine, Lauren Halsey, Leilah Babirye, and Taylor Nkomo) and in the Giardini (with works by Ivan Argote, Mariana Telleria, Rindon Johnson, and Sol Calero). A performance program is being planned with events during the opening and closing days of the Exhibition.

The Catalogue and the Short Guide of the Biennale Arte 2024 is being designed by Paula Tinoco from Estúdio Campo in São Paulo, and edited by myself with the collaboration of our two Artistic Organizers, Amanda Carneiro and Sofia Gotti. We have invited over 100 authors from different parts of the world to write the more than 300 artists' entries in the books, privileging a polyphonic approach to the publication. The Catalogue features interviews with the two artists who won the Golden Lion for Lifetime Achievement, Anna Maria Maiolino and Nil Yalter, another one with Claire Fontaine, and one with myself, conducted by Julieta González. In addition, it includes essays by Jaider Esbell, Kobena Mercer, Luce Delire, Naine Terena, Ranajit Guha, Ticio Escobar, Walter Mignolo.

In a personal level, I myself feel implicated in many of the themes, concepts, motifs and framework of the exhibition. I have lived abroad and have been fortunate to travel extensively

during my lifetime. Yet often I have experienced the treatment reserved to a Third World foreigner —although never a refugee, and in fact holding one of the highest ranking passports from the Global South according to the Henley Passport Index. I also identify myself as queer—the first openly queer curator in the history of the Biennale Arte. Moreover, I come from a context in Brazil and in Latin America where the indigenous artist and the *artista popular* play important roles; although they have been marginalized in art history, they have recently become to receive more attention. Brazil is also home to many diasporas, a land of foreigners as it were: besides the Portuguese who invaded and colonized the country, it is home to the largest African, Italian, Japanese and Lebanese diasporas in the world.

La Biennale itself, as an international event with so many official participations by numerous different countries, has always been a platform for the exhibition of works of foreigners from all over the world. In this rich tradition, the 60th International Art Exhibition of La Biennale di Venezia, the Biennale Arte 2024, will be a celebration of the foreign, the distant, the outsider, the queer, as well as the indigenous.

Lastly, I would like to express my deepest gratitude to the Board of La Biennale di Venezia and to the President Roberto Cicutto, who appointed me as Artistic Director of the Visual Arts sector in December 2022, in charge of curating the Biennale Arte 2024.

*Adriano Pedrosa*