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Foreigners Nowhere (*stranieri da nessuna parte*). A reflection on the curation of the 2024 Biennale di Venezia

Let's put it this way. We all know where Adriano Pedrosa is coming from. As curator of this year's Venice Biennale, running under the title "Strangers Everywhere", and as artistic director and curator of notable exhibitions and institutions (such as the São Paulo Biennales 1998 and 2006 as adjunct curator, the Istanbul Biennale 2011, and the Museo de Arte de São Paulo [MASP] since 2014), he is well aware of the critical potential of "alterity" and the power of narratives in the creation of history, epistemology, and "truth". He is no stranger to curation across transcontinental modernisms and their undergirding histories of colonial modernity. He reshaped and activated the collections of the MASP like nobody did before. His *Histórias* project, initiated with widely popular Brazilian anthropologist and historian Lilia K. Moritz Schwarcz at São Paulo's Instituto Tomie Ohtake, was brought to MASP in 2016 with an exploration of childhood, sexuality (2017), the Afro-Atlantic (2018), women (2019), dance (2020), indigeneity (2021), Brazil (2022), Nature (2023), sexual diversity (2024), delirious histories (2025). It opened up museum collections to tell new (hi)stories; (hi)stories no longer chronological, alphabetical, and simply told from a Western epistemology of time, but a speculative and open *curatorology* of a queer re-reading of modernism and modernity.

There is no need to rehearse the ways in which Brazil has been object-subject of the retelling of so many stories about modernism, modernity, colonialism, metaphysics, and epistemologies beyond nature and culture, the construction of race, blackness, indigeneity, and whiteness (see e.g. Schwarcz 1999, Holsten 1989). No need to tell the stories in which anthropologists, art historians, artists, and curators have both constructed and resisted the narratives of difference inscribed into this exemplary laboratory of modern violence. There is also no need to evoke to a reader of this magazine, or to anyone familiar with the history of curatorial practice of the last 40 years, such controversial and bifurcating exhibitions as *Magicians de la Terre* (curated by Jean-Hubert Martin in the Centre Pompidou in 1989) - certainly not the first but the most cited exhibition that revoked

the Western epistemological authority to determine what is artistic, what is indigenous, what is shamanistic. In other words, to define alterity. It is hard to ignore the consequences of exhibitions such as “*Primitivism*” in *20th Century Art. Affinity of the Tribal and the Modern* (curated by William Rubin at the MoMa in 1985) or the game-changing *Intense Proximity. An Anthology of the Far and Near* (curated by Okwui Enwezor, with Mélanie Bouteloup, Abdellah Karroum, Emilie Renard and Claire Staebler at the Palais de Tokyo in 2012). Or, in fact, *any* of the attempts over the last 20 years of the “piecemeal deconstruction of the modernist grid for reading the world” (Bourriaud 2024), which even took place within the Venetian portals in so many pavilions and exhibitions over the last decades. There is certainly no need to retell the history of Western philosophy and its engagement with identity and difference, with the idea of original concepts and metaphysics, or radical alterity (Derrida 1978, Levinas 1999). It is hard to ignore the consequences of works such as *Difference and Repetition* (Gilles Deleuze 1968) or *Cannibal Metaphysics* (Eduardo Viveiros de Castro, 2014 [2009]) in their conceptualisation of difference prior to identity, or the opening of possibilities for thinking world and alterity conceptually beyond non-Western metaphysics. It is also hard to ignore the refusal of a retreat into particularism and the rejection of Western epistemo-splaining by Edward Saïd, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (1988), Achille Mbembe, or Souleymane Bachir Diagne. Hard to ignore, in other words, the complex intellectual and curatorial labour of the last forty years, which has both provincialized the West and yet not retreated into identitarian relativism.

The curation of the 60th International Art Exhibition of the Venice Biennale, however, has managed to do just this. It offers a dangerously shallow, vague, and astoundingly as well as strangely ahistorical reflection on alterity, which confuses, as Simon Njami (2024) wrote in his review of the exhibition, a cultural, identitarian idea of racialisation and othering with a philosophical inquiry into phenomenological or transcendental alterity. Neither the puzzled main exhibition narrative in the Giardini, nor the formalistic rehashing of the Arsenale, and certainly not any of the textual production by Pedrosa or curatorial team have offered anything of the rich history of reflection on the politics, epistemology, aesthetics of alterity and difference. A rich history, which is of utmost importance for making sure that we stop stumbling down that slippery slope into a planetary hell, paved with the good intentions of so many current attempts to right the

wrongs of history that Baldwin warned about so fervently. We are on that slope and if the last 70 years of critical thought about coloniality, modernity, and racism mean anything to us, we need to delve into this library instead of just reading the abstracts.

The title of the exhibition is drawn, similar to the 2011 Istanbul Biennale, from an artistic work – in this case, a series of works created since 2004 by the anti-racist, anti-fascist Paris-founded and now Palermo-based collective Claire Fontaine. More precisely: a series of hung, suspended, arranged neon sculptures that bear the expression “Foreigners Everywhere” in different colours and languages, including “a number of indigenous languages, some of which are extinct”, as Pedrosa notes in his concept for the exhibition. (What he doesn’t note is that in 2009, at the Museum of Modern Art in São Paulo, MAM, he organised the 31st Panorama of Brazilian Art under the same title, which then was just translated into ancient Tupi, in a reverse act of imposed translation, which doesn’t make it any better). For Pedrosa, their work engages with “a world rife with multifarious crises concerning the movement and existence of people across countries, nations, territories, and borders” (p. 53). But these crises also concern practices of conditioning people “by identity, nationality, race, gender, sexuality, freedom, and wealth” (ibid). A crisis felt all too strongly as xenophobic nativism sweeps across Europe, reinstating a fear of foreigners that cynically uses similar slogans: Foreigners everywhere, let’s close our borders.

Biennale Arte 2024's *primary focus* is thus artists who are themselves foreigners, immigrants, expatriates, diasporic, émigré, exiled, or refugees – particularly those who have moved between the Global South and the Global North. Migration and decolonisation are key themes here. (p. 54)

To make clear what will unfold as the main danger of the curatorial (mis)conception here: Everyone is a stranger, everywhere. Deep down within ourselves, we are all strangers. But apparently there are some who are *more* foreign than others. We have heard this before somewhere else, but there it was an ironic warning: “All animals are equal. But some animals are more equal than others”, wrote George Orwell in his 1945 *Animal Farm*, at a moment in which “a world rife with multifarious crises” had yet another, more acute, meaning. If this didn't come from the road paved with good intentions, it would be easy to call this out as an erasure of criticality.

It is thus even more disturbing to read the conceptual note, which reminds us, or rather, associates freely, between loose etymologies of the word “stranger”, “queer”, and the Freudian “uncanny”. It was Levi-Strauss, whose structural anthropology based on fieldwork in Brazil described the dangers of the binary mind, which regards the unclassifiable as peril. Pedrosa invites the indigenous Brazilian MAHKU (Movimento dos Artistas Huni Kuin) collective, well known for their frequent collaborations with Western institutions, to paint the façade of the Giardini pavilion (*Kapewe Pukeni – The Alligator Bridge*), showing us well how the unclassifiable non-binary other can become the opposite of the epistemological peril, and instead turn into (mere) decorative illustration. As Manuel Borja-Villel points out in his review of the exhibition: “There is no antagonism between structure and surface. The problem, in this case, is curatorial, not artistic” (2024). This is not an epistemological challenge to a Western viewer, who stumbles underneath with a free *illy cold brew* to escape the heat or the rain – however visually grandiose the piece was. Quite unlike the frankly perverse installation *Dios es inmigrante* (God is an immigrant) by Argentinian artist Mariana Tellería, which suggests, neatly covered by roll-out grass, a sunken immigrant boat, which, however, bears the Christian cross, or a crucifix, as a mast. While this installation makes provocative sense in the port of Buenos Aires, by the MUNTREF (Museo de la Inmigración) where its initial edition was installed in 2017, it is misplaced and violent on the lawns

of the Giardini, and echoes the even more violent “monument” to a thousand migrants, who sank with the boat – *Barca Nostra* – that Christoph Büchel placed in the Arsenale port for the 2019 Venice Biennale edition, and which I surely do not want to reproduce here.



MAHKU (Movimento dos Artistas Huni Kuin), *Kapewe Pukeni (Bridgealligator)*; Mariana Telleria, *Dios es inmigrante (God Is an Immigrant)*, 2017/2023; 60th International Art Exhibition - La Biennale di Venezia, *Stranieri Ovunque – Foreigners Everywhere*, 2024. Photo by Matteo de Mayda. Courtesy La Biennale di Venezia.

If Pedrosa had committed his curatorial programme more daringly to the Italian context, which few Biennales have done admittedly, he would have connected the work evoked by Claire Fontaine to the thousands of initiatives all over the country that challenge the violent erasure of epistemological and existential plurality by the current government, and its fascist predecessors. Initiatives like *Black History Month*, like *Non Una di Meno*, like the various *Antifa* and *centri sociali* across the country and even in Venice. And he would have had to open the biennale to practices that extend beyond “art”, and turn the entire biennale into a *Disobedience Archive*,

rendering more serious homage to the serious conceptual and political work of Marco Scotini's long-term archive (ever-growing since 2005), which re-empowers the ostracised and awkward as a political potential, rather than just offering it as a welcome break from the old-fashioned ethnographic *Wunderkammer* narrative of the Arsenale that will last a few months before being disassembled. If, on the other hand, Pedrosa had committed his curatorial programme more daringly to the exploration of counter-, or parallel modernisms and modernities, he would have needed a public programme, a series of publications – otherwise said: intellectual, historical, theoretical depth – to connect the attempt of foreignizing everyone without essentialising difference – to the long genealogies of pre- and post-identitarian artists, thinkers, troublemakers. Or an attempt to open more daringly to the worlds that are on fire – quite literally - in and around the lagoon.



Disobedience Archive produced by Marco Scotini, 2005/2024, 60th International Art Exhibition - La Biennale di Venezia, *Stranieri Ovunque - Foreigners Everywhere*, 2024. Photo by Marco Zorzanello. Courtesy La Biennale di Venezia

Instead, we find neither. This biennale's curatorial approach re-essentialises cultural difference through its grid-like overriding of difference, which does not allow these many "foreigners" to express their own situated complexities. This is ironic, because his self-proclaimed aspiration is precisely to highlight the brilliance, depth, diversity of modernisms and non-normativities beyond

the West. In that sense, as Borja-Villel (2024) points out, he is even reinforcing the “hierarchy of a higher authority” in harmonizing difference. That there is rupture, a breaking out of the curatorial Borgesian grid of unclear categorisation, is thanks to the brilliance of the artists he seeks to bring into the limelight to pay the “historical debt” (Pedrosa) for their absence in the Western and European canon. With view to the curatorial narrative, however, this endless listing of reinscribed difference and originality (“This is the first time that XYZ is presented at Biennale Arte”) ends up creating what Nicolas Bourriaud described as “a safe space for essentialising folklore” (2024). This is no less problematic given that the large number of artists who are granted the “honour” of being included receive it posthumously. Taking in strangers into the well-funded confines of a private association that is inaccessible to publics who do not pay the entry fee to the Biennale does not amount to an act of decanonisation; it is opening the yawning jaws of the canon and gulping up what’s been on its fringes, suggesting a dubious linear and itself modernist path of progress that ends in Venice. (I am still not sure if the various attempts to overcome, cut through, break down the artificial autonomy of the Biennale walls by those invited to present within them is adding insult to injury or if it offers a welcome institutional critique, as the Austrian Pavilion of the 2023 Architecture biennale by collective AKT and architect Hermann Czech). In any case: Canon pluralisation is not yet decanonisation, not least because the idea of a canon itself is a purifying modern exercise. And whilst a queer, indigenous, unclassifiable, and self-determined force has just been gathering forces to override an early-retirement, half-asleep, purified Western canon of institutional critique, and whilst their “inclusion” gives reason to rejoice, it remains an act of host-generosity, which is paternal and belittling. “The other always subsists as other, and the separation between those who are outside and those who are inside remains intact” (Borja-Villel 2024). The spectre of *hostipitality* remains.

Bourriaud has described the process of curating the record number of artists in this show, many of whom invited for the first time, as their becoming “subject to a kind of Borgesian classification: emigré Italians, queers, those forgotten by history, self-taught artists, rural communities, artists from the Global South” (ibidem). But sadly, the possibility of unravelling their narratives and letting them weave together is made impossible by their arrangement in an ethnographic inscription, where the two arguably least important sides of art play the most important role: form

and identity. There is no investigation of the true power of classification, or any attempt of its undoing, questioning. We have Velazquez' *Las Meninas* without Foucault's *The Order of Things*. The showcasing of complexity without its investigation. Pablo Delano's *The Museum of the Old Colony* does not present "an intricately woven tapestry of Puerto Rico's troubled histories", as Pedrosa claims (p. 126), but instead restates and replicates images of "Spanish and US domination over indigenous and native communities as well as people of African descent" (ibidem). As a counter example, just outside the Giardini Central Pavillon, Sandra Gamarra Heshiki's Spanish Pavilion *Migrant Art Gallery* is a literal subversion of the historical Western ethnological pinacotheca, subverting each of its rooms, elements, narratives with subtle comments written over the paintings or included in the captions.

On our way through the first part of the Arsenale's unquestioned ethnological museum, we wade through captions that legitimise works by their rootedness in non-normative otherness, which are arranged it appears by operationalised grids of form, material, and size, offering each their own small opening to express their visual voice to the cacophony of alter-modernisms. (This finds its culmination in the Giardini's slap-in-the-face *Nucleo Storico* on "Portraits", which gives each part of the world an image to represent their modernism. A flipcard approach to historical complexity, when we need more microstoria, as in Ersan Mondtag's installation performance *requiem for an asbestos worker* in the German Pavilion, see Tinius 2024). But back to the Arsenale, we end up eventually in a kind of tribute hall, which pulls the rugs from underneath the exhibition's already cold feet: the second of three *Nucleo Storico* sections, this time so awkwardly entitled "Italians Everywhere". Besides the *Disobedience Archive*'s mollusc-shell spiral, it is ironic that the only refreshing technical installation is actually recycling architect Lina Bo Bardi's *Caveletes de vidro*, designed for MASP already in 1968 and reproduced with authorisation by the Instituto Bardi, allowing visitors to see both front- and backside of the exhibited paintings or artworks, encased in glass rectangulars held upright by concrete blocks.



Romualdo Locatelli, *Legong Dance*, 1939, 60th International Art Exhibition - La Biennale di Venezia, *Stranieri Ovunque – Foreigners Everywhere*, 2024. Photo by Marco Zorzanello. Courtesy La Biennale di Venezia

Even more ironically, it is here that we realise what is truly wrong with the curatorial conception of this biennale: While “we”, humans on planet earth, even those cyborgs and hybrid beings, may all be foreigners “truly, and deep down inside”, what is really meant with “foreigners”, is actually not “us”, the white, European, or even better – Italian – modernist artist. Because, as Pedrosa puts it himself, “Italians abroad have often become embedded in local cultures” (you notice the difference in scale between the “diasporic Italians” and “local cultures”), “at times playing significant roles in the development of the narratives of modernism beyond their native land” (p. 59). Otherwise put: there is something deeper even still than the “foreigner in all of us”, and that is the “native European”, who ventures abroad. Weren’t we just lectured about the fact that especially in Venice, in Italy, the motto of the biennale takes on another meaning, because “In Venice, foreigners *are* everywhere” (p. 54)? *Italians Everywhere* betrays the reckoning with the Black Mediterranean, with Black Athena, Black Rome, and any of the work that has cracked open the imaginary of a white, native Mediterranean Europe. “All that remains is folklore, the kitschy side of the *vernacular*” (Bourriaud 2024). I do not believe that Romualdo Locatelli’s *Legong Dance* (1939) does away with the colonial imaginary of a white (Italian) colonial gaze onto

sexualised others, in this case, as we are reminded, “prepubescent girls who usually retired after marrying”. In fact, as is further described in its backside caption: “They are depicted in suspended and exotic scenarios that inevitably recall Gauguin’s experience in Tahiti” – which we know for its deeply troubling aspects, to put it mildly.

When Pedrosa feels generous, he lets these vernacular artists speak: “In the Global South, many artists encountered European modernism through travel, study, or books. Yet, they bring their own highly personal and powerful reflections and contributions to their works, depicting figures from their very own visual repertoires, histories, and lives – including themselves” (57f.). The deep entanglement of world production should leave us no space for patronising grammars. We know that the subaltern can indeed speak, too (Spivak 2010 [1988])! We know that there is much more mutual mockery, appropriation, and sympathetic magic. So let me make it clear again: This review is about curation, and not about the artists invited to this show. Alessandra Ferrini’s *Gaddafi in Rome: Anatomy of a Friendship* (2024) in the Giardini exhibition, for example, offers just such a collage of push and pulls, reconfiguring, betrayal and reappropriation of the pre- and neo-colonial relationship between Italy and Libya. In fact, innumerable are the examples of striking, complex, deep works of art that span the exhibitions put together by Pedrosa. And maybe that is the one upshot: the artists are astounding, and create their own mini-biennales, and mini-manifestos within Pedrosa’s “manifesto” (Raza 2024).

The Arvani Art Project collective mural, for instance, a celebration of transgender women and transformation, occupied a space not used for large-scale concluding pieces in the Arsenale for the first time, but spoke with unpretentious clarity. It doesn’t sit with the same mind-blowing depth and tongue-in-cheek rhythmic blows, as, for instance, the American Pavillon’s Jeffrey Gibson’s *the space in which to place me*, but that goes for so many other pieces and works outside the main installation, such as Switzerland’s genius *Super Superior Civilizations* by Guerreiro do Divino Amor.



Part of the Arvani Art Project collective mural painting, *Diaspore*, in the Arsenale exhibition. 60th International Art Exhibition - La Biennale di Venezia, *Stranieri Ovunque – Foreigners Everywhere*, 2024. Photo by Andrea Avezzi. Courtesy La Biennale di Venezia

Fantastic, clever, funny, for instance, also Sol Calero's "Pabellón Criollo" (2024) in the Giardini. A great example of a smart way to think across creolité, stereotypes, but to do so with sustainability in mind, reusing materials from the previous international biennales in Venice. Her situated, fun, albeit incredibly serious scenographies meander through projections, collages, palimpsests of Latin America, celebrating, rethinking, mocking how we view ourselves and others, how "others" view "us" and so on.



Sol Calero, Pabellón Criollo, 2024, 60th International Art Exhibition - La Biennale di Venezia, *Stranieri Ovunque – Foreigners Everywhere*, 2024. Photo by Matteo de Mayda. Courtesy La Biennale di Venezia

Bouchra Khalili's immense oeuvre, sadly, is misplaced into a simple illustration of a migrant position, which renarrates traumatic movement, but ends up recreating the stigmatised vision of the migrant that not every migrated, fled, Diasporic person, artist, scholar shares. It is, again, rendered here in this context – not by itself, but the curatorial positioning – as a re-authentication of otherness, instead of a dedication to the agency and subjectivity and fictional powers that every human being can express, even under circumstances of duress. And that in the safe confines of the Arsenale warehouse, watched by expats and voluntary travellers, seems frankly an insult to the people (and children) that are serving as yet another tick in Pedrosa's list of foreigners.



Bouchra Khalili, *The Mapping Journey Project*, 2008/2011, 60th International Art Exhibition - La Biennale di Venezia, *Stranieri Ovunque – Foreigners Everywhere*, 2024. Photo by Marco Zorzanello. Courtesy La Biennale di Venezia

But if we are to go beyond an identitarian folklore interpretation of the world, in which everything can be compartmentalised into safe difference and lukewarm positivity, we need to actually reckon with the possibilities afforded to us by creativity, fiction, and fantasy. These possibilities afforded to us by fiction are, after all, what make us into the plastic multiplicities that art is rendering visible, as anthropologist David Berliner (2024) suggests. Then indeed we would be better off starting from the assumption that nobody *is* a foreigner, and that instead, there are foreigners nowhere. We are all in a state of becoming other, foreign, strange all the time, which renders the distinction situated, local, constructed. We need to understand who is being othered in what ways, and how we can undo violent forms of estrangement, while reckoning at the same time with more radical forms of alterity – of forms of being, of existence, of even what we mean by difference. These are positions that have been articulated by theatre practitioners and dramaturges, anthropologists and

sociologists working with the political concept of the post-migrant or post-other (Ndikung and Römhild 2013, Sharifi 2019, Tinius 2024), but there is an altogether related anthropological discussion on the very idea of alterity and metaphysics, which I alluded to in the opening paragraphs, which goes even further. It seems indeed as if this biennale seeks to take us back into an old-school ethnographic imaginary in which we cannot transcend the supposed givens of identity, location, sexuality which we have constructed ourselves - when it is precisely an entire anti-essentialist agenda, one that is politically so important today, which has sought to show us that we don't need to overcome these "givens"; we just need to stop reiterating and imagining them. Every imagination of difference – metaphysical, cultural, ontological – is a way to construct world, cosmos, life, death. So let's situate these imaginations, the ones we like and the ones we don't, and see how they are formulated, put together, point out their glitches. Otherwise we will never be able to dis- and reassemble them.

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