



## Scratching the Surface

How the Venice Biennale reveals problems with nationalist art patronage / **Art**

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Docked in the choppy waters of a Venetian canal, along the warehouse architecture of the Arsenale—one of two venues of the 2019 Venice Biennale—is the ruin of a 90-foot fishing boat. Titled “*Barca Nostra*”—Italian for “our boat”—it forms part of a project by the Swiss-Icelandic artist Christoph Büchel. On the night of 18 April 2015, in waters between Libya and the Mediterranean island of Lampedusa, this boat capsized, and nearly eight hundred passengers drowned or were lost at sea. Each passenger was a migrant fleeing war or famine, hoping to seek refuge in Europe. On board were people from Syria, Gambia, Somalia, Sierra Leone, Senegal, Mali, Libya, Eritrea and Bangladesh. Only 28 people survived.

A year after it was wrecked, the boat was brought back to Sicily, where forensic experts combed through its interiors to segregate and identify the body parts and belongings left behind. The boat’s passage from Libya was an operation spearheaded by Mohammed Ali Malek, a Tunisian smuggler. Malek was seen brandishing a long wooden pole to keep his passengers in line while ferrying them to the boat in a small wooden dinghy. He contacted the Italian coastguard in Rome as soon as they hit international waters, asking for help. The coastguard responded by signalling a nearby Portuguese container ship. Witnesses saw Malek grab the steering wheel and slam it into the oncoming vessel. He was found guilty of manslaughter, and sentenced to 18 years in prison and a €9 million fine.

Büchel’s project to bring the vessel to Venice cost a cool €33 million to complete, including the original €9.5 million the Italian navy spent on salvaging the boat. Venice is just the first port of call; the boat will later travel to the Sicilian town of Augusta, where it will be developed into a “garden of memory.” *Barca Nostra* is currently anchored

opposite a Biennale coffee shop. On the opening days of the art show, immaculately dressed—and primarily European—attendees were slurping down espressos within eyeshot of the large tear on the side of its hull, which had originally let water flood in and sink the ship. Most visitors did not recognise that the boat was a so-called artwork, or anything of note at all, assuming it to be part of the existing infrastructure of the Arsenale, a former shipyard. The presence of the boat, especially as an “artwork,” is uncomfortable: the only purpose it serves is to shock its viewing audience, should they be able to discern what it is. Its inclusion in the Biennale, as part of the curator Ralph Rugoff’s group exhibition *May You Live in Interesting Times*—a show that happens in tandem with the independent presentations at national pavilions—is perplexing, and reeks of Büchel’s privilege.

The phrase “May you live in interesting times” comes from a non-existent Chinese proverb. In the late 1930s, a British member of parliament used it to describe the unsteady future of Britain in the face of escalating war rhetoric. He claimed it was an ancient Chinese curse, and in typically Orientalist fashion, this turned out to be completely untrue. Rugoff intentionally plays with this misunderstanding, and the unlikely generosity of the phrase allows for several different interpretations at once. The “interesting times” threatened here are plagued by the calamities of twenty-first-century living: the migration crisis, big data, surveillance technologies, institutionalised racism, the arms trade, the prison-industrial complex and climate change. Our times get most interesting when the theme is taken as a provocation or a threat. To live in an interesting time is to live in an extraordinary time, when the bizarre, frightening and uncanny is no longer the exception but the rule.

But the premise of “*Barca Nostra*” is insulting. The project demonstrates

a shallowness typical to blockbuster artworks that take on politics in the twenty-first century—big gestures do not always equal smart arguments. The work does not offer nuance or agency to those who died. It also misses an opportunity, especially given the Biennale’s European context, to point toward the audience’s own complicity with the boat’s brutal history. As the critic Alexandra Stock wrote for the Egyptian online newspaper *Mada Masr*, “*Barca Nostra* is a performance. It’s watching a middle-aged European man metaphorically drape himself in the violent deaths of migrants whom he doesn’t bother to name and then, as a second act, attempt to pin some form of vague guilt on his audience.”

Perhaps Rugoff intended the work to introduce a realpolitik in the midst of contemporary art’s tendency towards abstraction. As a result of that curatorial choice, a literal piece of failing political infrastructure now sits among conceptual or propositional works. But the boat works more as a gruesome reminder of the violence of nationalised border politics. The irony is not lost here, at the Venice Biennale, where one of the central modes of representation at play is that of the nation state, through the format of the national pavilions.

For each edition, participating national pavilions put on individual exhibitions that respond to the overarching theme. India has a pavilion this year—its second ever, after an eight-year hiatus. Given the momentum created by the first pavilion in 2011, which was curated by Ranjit Hoskote and fashioned itself as a “laboratory for the Idea of India,” the arts community was hoping to have a more permanent place at the event. However, this requires some serious political manoeuvring and negotiation. First, the organisers must extend an invitation to participate, which is exclusive. And then, the ministry of culture of the nation in question must duly respond. Given the

Biennale's model, in order to have an official presence, nation states must be involved in the production, funding and facilitation of the pavilions. It is a form of soft cultural diplomacy, whose origins go back to the nationalist politics of the late nineteenth century.

The first iteration of the event was in 1895, an initiative of Riccardo Selvatico, the mayor of Venice and a comic playwright. In 1893, Selvatico and his team sent invitations to artists from 15 countries stating that the biennial event would display "all the noblest activities of the modern spirit, without any distinction of nationality." The presentation took place at the Napoleonic gardens, the Giardini, across a string of interlinking public promenades and gardens. By 1905 the exhibition had grown exponentially, and needed to expand its infrastructure. This is how, in 1907, the first national pavilion was built, by Belgium. Hungary, Bavaria—now Germany—and Britain followed, as did France in 1912. After the First World War, more contenders flooded in: Spain, Czechoslovakia, the United States, Austria and Greece. An event that had resolved to eschew nationalism had quite literally cemented the legacy of nation states across Europe.

In 1976, the practice of setting an overarching theme to unite the works on display was developed, a model that now proliferates in biennales across the world—Istanbul, Sao Paulo, Gwangju, Sharjah and, of course, Kochi. Venice, however, remains the only one tied to its nationalist representations. The format certainly needs an update, and sits as a bewildering anomaly in the globalised politics of the twenty-first century. Participating nation states rarely overlap their presence, and the pavilions come off as largely separatist in nature. They are also pitted against each other in vying for the coveted Golden Lion. In its most basic form, each pavilion serves to give a survey, commentary or insight into the current discourses of its nation state.

As such, the Indian pavilion takes the theme, *Our Time for a Future Caring*, with explicit reference to the "legacy of Gandhi," who is the protagonist of a presentation that represents the current political moment as one of

needing a move toward nonviolence and collective mass action. While this call for collective mass action is potent, and serves as an urgent reminder, the pavilion does little to reference the violence of contemporary Indian politics. The show is curated by the Kiran Nadar Museum of Art—which is also the pavilion's primary sponsor—and features several works from the museum's own collection. Roobina Karode, the chief curator at the museum, does not take a literal approach to this legacy of Gandhi. She is cognisant of how Gandhi recurs in the political consciousness during times of crisis, and attempts a critique of this tendency. The pavilion is thus informatively hung, like a museum show, and Karode has focussed her attention on Gandhi's writings on craft, the dignity of labour, non-violence and protest. Her argument is peaceful, but a little too quiet: one has to look closely to find the critique of dominant—particularly Hindu—political narratives in the works on display. Ashim Purkayastha's series of stamps take on caste and farmer's suicides, and even depict a small image of a "Muslim

anonymously, in the press. This is, undoubtedly, very difficult to do, given the involvement of the Indian culture ministry. The KNMA, with its delicate curatorial approach, seems to have pulled off an immense logistical and organisational feat. It does become quickly apparent that this particular theme, with its focus on Gandhi, has a lot to do with the ministry of culture.

The pavilion is the result of a public-private partnership between the culture ministry, the National Gallery of Modern Art, the KNMA and the Confederation of Indian Industry. The nature of this partnership seems to imply that the financial heavy lifting has come from the private bodies, which acquiesced to the demands made by the ministry, such as the theme. The Indian cultural economy certainly relies on private initiatives much more than on public ones—and, in turn, on private institutions—as there is such little access to public funding and, of course, the ever-present threat of censorship. This particular partnership has enabled the pavilion to exist where at other moments in the past it has stalled. And this

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Gandhi." Rummana Hussain's sculptures—assemblies of terracotta, bricks and pigments—make reference to the fall of the Babri Masjid: a dome-like pot spills over in red hues of terracotta and brick. The tenderness of the works is a refreshing approach in comparison to some of the shock-value pieces on display elsewhere at the Biennale, such as Büchel's boat, but the question remains of how accurately the pavilion speaks to the present political moment in India.

One response is to demand a sharper critique, something that shows the world that the cultural practitioners of India do not shy away from asking tough questions. Some have said this after the Biennale opened, albeit

is significant. Presumably, the ministry of culture also noticed an opportunity to continue the rhetoric of a nonviolent India abroad.

The stakes are high. India should indeed have a permanent place at the event, but to do so it must straddle both the demands of the ministry as well as those the Biennale Foundation itself. It must be informative; it must also be critical. For the Indian pavilion to exist, it must work harder than others: be relatable to an audience that is largely unaware of the nuances of the Indian context as well as assent to the brief set out by the state's involvement with its infrastructure. Furthermore, it stands on shaky ground, as its continued pres-



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ence at the event remains uncertain, given that we do not yet have a permanent pavilion at the Biennale. For another pavilion to happen, the culture ministry must, once again, be brought to the table.

It must also be said that, regardless of whether pavilions choose to critique the nation states they represent, or to quieten the present-day politic, both approaches are performative, and come with their own contradictions. It is evident that certain countries also perform their critique much more than others. For instance, at the 2015 Biennale, titled *All the World's Futures*, the German national pavilion offered a group presentation that included a film and installation by Hito Steyrl, a German artist of Japanese descent. Steyrl's "Factory of the Sun" was a kind of virtual-reality game and documentary-film dance party. In the film's opening sequence, a Deutsche Bank PR agent delivers an emotionless justification of an assassination—by drone—of anti-capitalist protestors in Germany. Using images of dystopia so prevalent in our times, where everyday aesthetics are only slightly tweaked to look futuristic—think *Black Mirror*—here the point is that financial institutions are the real perpetrators of state-sanctioned violence. Steyrl called out Deutsche Bank for being complicit and accelerationist, and she did so at a time when the European debt crisis was reaching its

climax, as were the negotiations over Greece's debt to Germany. In a final twist, Sparkassen-Kulturfonds, a cultural fund established by a coalition of German savings banks, was the main sponsor of the pavilion. Unfortunately, in order to critique the structure one is often co-opted by its infrastructure.

This year, the Belgian pavilion—the oldest at the Biennale—took a markedly different approach, with a presentation by Jos de Gruyter and Harald Thys. Rickety amusement-park-style animatronics typify Belgian characters that knead bread, knit from rocking chairs or grind knives. Each has an eerie and completely vacant look. Each is also a character of European pastoralism, repeating the same task on a loop. The work can be read as a joke, or an admission of guilt, with a kind of vulnerability to its confession: white privilege must at first recognise itself before it begins the process of correcting its patterns. In 2015, the Belgian pavilion did something bold, and opened itself up to outside collaboration: in a presentation entitled *Personne et les autres*—Person and the Others—the artist Vincent Meessen invited artists from Africa and Asia to show their work—primarily those from Belgium's former colony, the Congo. In "The Other Memorial," the Congolese artist Sammy Baloji proposed that the industrialisation of the Congo

**ABOVE:** The ruins of a 90-foot fishing boat. Titled "Barca Nostra"—Italian for "our boat"—it forms part of a project by the Swiss-Icelandic artist Christoph Büchel. The artwork has been critiqued for the shallowness of the political gesture it attempts to make.

**RIGHT:** However, it is difficult not to notice the voyeuristic nature of the images in Soham Gupta's portraits of people in Kolkata marginalised by caste and class. In an attempt to deliver agency, Gupta proposes that each image is a "collaboration" between subject and photographer but the power dynamics of this collaboration is not clear.

was the direct result of imperialism, with a delicate and moving work of thinly hammered copper sheets of leaves that were historically confiscated from the people who lived in Katanga.

The idea of the pavilion was also to revisit Belgian modernity and see it for the referential project that it was: heavily dependent on influences from Congolese intellectuals and artists. In an audio-visual contribution, Meessen discovers a previously unpublished document: the lyrics of a protest song from 1968, written by Joseph M'Belolo Ya M'Piku in Kikongo. The document was often quoted by the Situationist International, a group of Marxist artists, intellectuals and self-proclaimed social revolutionaries, of which M'Belolo Ya M'Piku was a part, but never mentioned anywhere in the writing of that history. Meessen shows us the document's authorship through a rumba ensemble recorded in Kinshasa at the famous nightclub Un Deux Trois, which was founded by the Congolese musician Franco Luambo. This pavilion showed how systems of reparation can be put in place in order to counter nationalist narratives—a particularly important objective in Venice, given its global reach.

Apart from being a space for reparations, the Venice Biennale can also be a site where histories can be actively rewritten or challenged. In 2015 the Gujral Foundation put on a collateral event entitled *My East is Your West*, curated by Natasha Ginwala, which was a shared pavilion between India and Pakistan, with works by Rashid Rana and Shilpa Gupta. It showed an optimistic model for what was possible: nations of the subcontinent coming together to contest their individualised histories. The Indian arts infrastructure certainly could do more to recognise its privileged place in subcontinent, and open itself up to sharing space with other South Asian artists. The onus here should certainly be on the Indian cultural economy to support and encourage the dissidence of artists from neighbouring nation states, and give them protection through access and infrastructure.

The international group show can also stand in response to this nationalist representation. In what was a neat decision by Rugoff this year, both venues—the Giardini and the Arsenale—showed work by the same artists. Each venue held a "proposition". The group show includes the work of three Indian artists, the photographers Soham Gupta and Gauri Gill, and the conceptual artist Shilpa Gupta. In Gill's series *Becoming*, 54 archival prints survey the architectural landscape of a rapidly urbanising India. Gill takes us to newly built townships at the outskirts of cities, often stripping them of their names and locations to comment on their "sameness." She approaches these townships with a tender formal attention—all images are in black and white; deprived of colour to show only glass and steel—and this makes them deeply



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poetic. The logic here takes a postmodern route: of flamboyance, pastiche and aspiration. Given the dusty rolling infrastructure of steel and glass, we could be in any rapidly developing city in the world. The images are not melancholic, and while they are emptied of their human inhabitants, we still notice their hybridity: facades remain unfinished, paint peels off from neglect and poor materials, roads split open. Gill disturbs the hierarchy of what we see as being worthy of our attention.

In a more nostalgic mode, Shilpa Gupta's work directs our attention to narratives that are actively erased. In a work entitled "For, In Your Tongue I Cannot Fit"—the phrase comes from a poem by the fourteenth-century Azerbaijani poet Seyid Imadaddin Nesimi—Gupta commemorates a hundred poets who have been either executed or imprisoned by fascist regimes for their political commentary. It is a sound installation, and upon enter-



ing it, whispered slivers of poems run through the space in a dramatic choreography. The work is immersive and moving. It is a direct comment on the vulnerability of our freedoms of speech, and takes a global approach: Gupta has gathered poems in Arabic, Hindi, Azeri, Russian, Spanish and Urdu.

Of the three, Soham Gupta is the most confrontational. In a series of images of “the nightlife of Kolkata,” Gupta uses a high-intensity flash to make portraits of those marginalised by the city’s caste- and class-based segregation—the homeless, the addicts, the transgender people, the diseased, the differently abled, to name a few, almost all of whom belong to oppressed castes. His work is not polite, neither is

it beautiful, he instead points a harsh light to the human cost of what is being cleansed from the city. He makes us look at what we are otherwise used to averting our gaze from. However, it is difficult not to notice the voyeuristic nature of the images. In the curatorial note, Rugoff insists that the images are of “poverty and the homeless,” and this feels reductive. In an attempt to deliver agency, Gupta proposes that each image is a “collaboration” between subject and photographer. But though many of the works in Rugoff’s show propose such collaborations, the power dynamics of these are not always made clear. It creates a defensive atmosphere, where artists are justifying their actions before we are able to gather our

thoughts on the actions themselves. Like Gill, Gupta is not nostalgic, but seems to be working toward an aesthetic clarity. This can sometimes be enough, without requiring a further moral explication.

When the state and its institutions fail, it is art that takes on the burden of politics, and this is nowhere truer

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than in the representational infrastructure of the Venice Biennale. In these politically charged times, what feels missing is a vulnerability of process rather than of subject. In a powerful letter of protest against the American Whitney Biennale, two artists and a writer declared, “Now the highest aspiration of avowedly radical work is its own display.” This holds true for all arts infrastructure—galleries, museums, public projects such as biennales. Representational infrastructure makes certain demands of its work, and no matter the political promise of the work on display, it is difficult for this not to get co-opted. While the Biennale ensures that visitors are able to survey a wide range of representations, it is in fact the representational aesthetic that we must dispute. This is especially true of the national-pavilion model, considering, especially, the global death of the nation state. For most of the twentieth century, as Rana Dasgupta wrote in *The Guardian*, there was “an authentic ‘fit’ between politics, economy and information, all of which were organised at a national scale.” This “authentic fit” has certainly ruptured, and exactly by those things that threaten our interesting times: surveillance capitalism, the international market, big data and the arms trade. Identity politics has reached a dead end, and there is an urgent need for its redressal. ■