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Venice POWER BROKERS

The men and women who work behind the scenes to bring the world's greatest exhibition, the Biennale, to life

By Eric Bryant and Angela M.H. Schuster

SINCE ITS FOUNDING 120 YEARS AGO as a single exhibition with an array of mostly European artists, la Biennale di Venezia has grown into a sprawling collection of shows and events taking place over more than six months. In fact, this year's extravaganza—kicking off a month earlier than usual, on May 9, to capitalize on visitors coming to northern Italy for the Expo Milano world's fair—will include the 56th International Art Exhibition with more than 130 artists; nearly 90 national pavilions, some featuring more than a dozen artists; 44 officially recognized “collateral events,” which typically remain on view for the full run; and dozens more ancillary pop-up shows, performances, mini-festivals, and parties. Behind each of these is a person who wielded both creative imagination and force of will to bring the event into being. The artistic vision is on view for all to see. Less discernible is the labor and money, the connections and negotiations that determine what gets shown and what doesn't. Here, we profile eight of the people—curators, a gallerist, a patron, a banker, and a politician—who remain relatively unsung in their efforts to ensure that the art stands out.

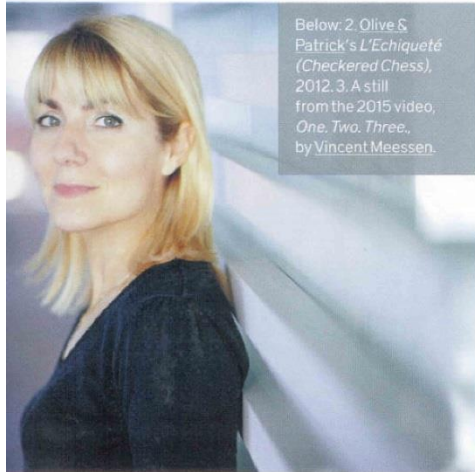


OKWUI ENWEZOR Curator, 56th International Art Exhibition, "All the World's Futures"

Since his appointment as head of the Biennale's International Exhibition 18 months ago, Enwezor has downplayed his status as only the second curator after the legendary Harald Szeemann to helm both the Biennale and Documenta in Kassel. Yet the truly global nature of the Nigerian-born Enwezor's expertise, together with the depth of his experience—since his 2002 show in Germany, he has led events of similar scope in Seville, Gwangju, and Paris—does set him apart. Known for rigorously structured exhibitions, the curator fills his shows with unexpected juxtapositions and mixes artists who are diverse, both geographically and generationally. This time out, he is speaking of a series of "filters" used to organize the hundreds of individual works with the aim of illuminating the prospects for what lies ahead—as promised in the title—as well as the last 120 years of exhibitions in Venice. Among the 136 artists are thirtysomethings like the Peruvian-Danish Elena Damiani and the Turkish-Swedish Meriç Algün Ringborg and 80-year-old Teresa Burga from Peru; artists already feted as national representatives such as American Sarah Sze and Christian Boltanski from France; artist collectives formed in the past few years; and despite a plurality from Europe, a rich selection of artists from Asia, Africa, and South America. There are complaints every year about the sprawling nature of the International Exhibition, but if anyone can create a show that stands up to the weight of history, it is Enwezor.



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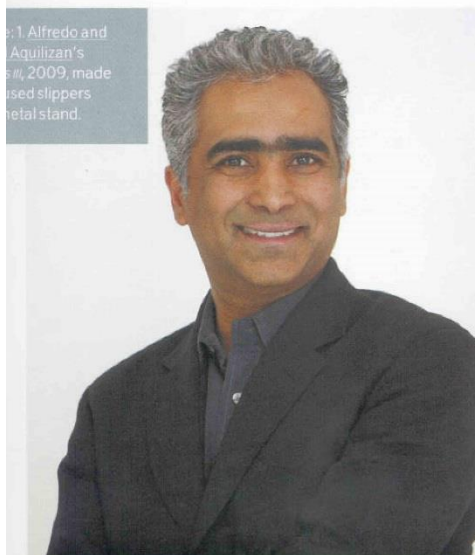
Below: 2. Olive & Patrick's *L'Echiqueté* (Checkered Chess), 2012. 3. A still from the 2015 video, *One. Two. Three.*, by Vincent Meessen.

KATERINA GREGOS Curator, Belgian Pavilion, "Personne et les Autres"

"Presentations at the Venice Biennale should reach beyond established names and person-centric presentations of artists 'whose time has come,'" says Gregos. "They must embrace ideas that are pertinent to the times in which we live." The Brussels-based curator backs up that conviction with a show conceived in collaboration with artist Vincent Meessen, who shares his platform with a dozen artists from around the world. This rethinking of one of Venice's defining traditions isn't a one-off experiment; in 2011, Gregos curated an exhibition for the Danish pavilion in which 18 international artists, including two Danes, explored the issue of freedom of speech. In Gregos's current undertaking—occupying the pavilion built in the Giardini in 1907, just before King Leopold II turned over the Congo Free State to Belgium—artworks tap into largely unknown "micro-histories" of art, music, and activism to challenge Eurocentric notions of modernity steeped in colonialism even as they highlight the benefits that can come from cultural cross-pollination. A prime example: the Congo, a former Belgian colony where a cadre of intellectuals rose to the fore, playing a seminal role in the development of the avant-garde Situationist International in the mid 20th century. In a new video work, Meessen sets a long-lost protest song from the era to rumba music. "The viewer will be able to discover a whole host of untold stories that occurred outside, beyond, or beneath the vertical relationships of power imposed by colonialism," says Gregos, "stories that point to a relationship between Europe and the colonies that was not only grounded in negative experiences—of exploitation or violence, for example—but also in positivities and in fruitful outcomes."



1. Alfredo and Aquiluzan's *Slippers*, 2009, made of used slippers on a metal stand.



SUNDARAM TAGORE Curator, Tagore Foundation International, "Frontiers Reimagined"

The theme of artists breaking down borders both in their practices and their personal lives unites the diverse works in Tagore's collateral exhibition, but it might also be seen as the impulse driving the New York gallerist's own broader project. A director at Pace Wildenstein before debuting his Chelsea gallery in 2000, Tagore has gone on to open additional spaces in Hong Kong and Singapore and on Manhattan's Upper East Side; create a foundation; direct a documentary; and, now, produce a museum exhibition coordinated with the Biennale—all promoting the notion of art as both product of and impetus for cross-cultural communication. "Venice has always represented the ultimate stage on which to mount a show about cultural dialogue," Tagore says. Still, "in the end, mounting a show at the Biennale is not for the faint of heart; it's hugely complex and hugely expensive." Featuring 70 works by 44 artists—about half from his gallery's stable—from 25 countries, the show has been more than two years in the making. Coordinating director Nathalie Vernizzi has lived in Venice for a full year, drawing up two separate 80-page proposals to secure both the venue—the city-run Museo di Palazzo Grimani—and the coveted "official collateral event" status, which confers a variety of coordinated marketing and publication programs. "Without having her on the ground in Venice, I think it would have been much more difficult, if not impossible," Tagore says. "Ultimately, however, curators from all over the world are dealing with complex ideas, which they're presenting to a highly sophisticated audience. That's a thrilling prospect."

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SHEIKHA HOOR AL QASIMI Curator, United Arab Emirates Pavilion,
 "1980–Today: Exhibitions In the United Arab Emirates"

The vaunted art scene that seems to have sprung up almost overnight from the desert sands of the United Arab Emirates is more fragmented than it may appear from afar. The leading commercial galleries and art fairs are based in Dubai; museums founded in partnership with international brand-name institutions are situated in Abu Dhabi; and Sharjah plays host to its own always intriguing biennial, which consistently places the art itself front and center and has played a key role in defining the recent art history of the region. It's appropriate, then, that since the UAE's first show in Venice, in 2009, control of the national pavilion has rotated among the emirates, allowing presentations to reflect their differentiated engagement with the art world. This is the first year under the control of Sheikhha Hoor Al Qasimi, the London-trained artist who curated the Sharjah Biennial's 2003 outing and has served as the event's director ever since. It's not surprising to see her extending her approach to the world stage with a thoughtful survey of pivotal art of the country's last 35 years, featuring the work of 15 artists. "Among the most rewarding—and at times challenging—things about working with the arts in the UAE is the opportunity not only to engage with diverse communities on a local level, but also to introduce these local artists to new, and often international, audiences," she says. "This is important even for those who are familiar with contemporary art from the Middle East or who are from the UAE but may not know much about the artists who played a critical role in shaping the UAE's early conceptual work."

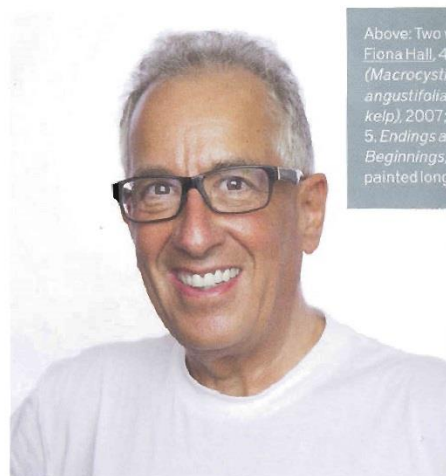


Below: 6. *Portrait*, 1982, in welded metal by Najat Meky. 7. *Untitled*, 1994, in oil on canvas by Obaid Suroor.

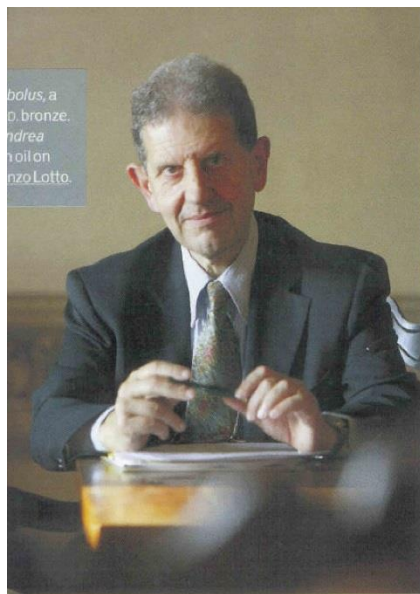


SIMON MORDANT Commissioner, Australian Pavilion, "Wrong Way Time: Fiona Hall"

When it opens this month, the strikingly modern Australian Pavilion, with a cantilevered upper-story room that hovers over a canal, will culminate 108 years of new architecture, the final acquisition for a walkable museum of 30 or so structures that dot the Giardini, a corner of Venice henceforth off-limits to new construction. The building might also be read as the apex of the philanthropic career of the driving force behind its construction: Mordant, a U.K.-born investment banker, worked his way up through the arts patronage system, joining the Commissioner's Council a decade ago, taking the post of deputy commissioner six years back, and now wrapping up his second and final two-year term as commissioner for the national pavilion, a post whose duties include selecting the representative artist and raising private funds to pay for the show. As a side job, he took on the task of replacing the "temporary" structure that had languished on the site since 1988, bringing to bear his experience spearheading the \$53 million campaign to construct a new Museum of Contemporary Art in Sydney. Through the feasibility studies and the pressures of completing construction in the time between exhibitions, Mordant says one principle guided him: "I have been keen that the support of the Biennale has national engagement." He cites the roster of 81 donors from across the country, including artists, as evidence that the goal has been achieved. And Mordant is confident in the selection of this year's artist, Fiona Hall, who clearly fits the traditional profile of a Venice representative: a well-known and well-liked talent who has earned her place. "The opportunity for a country to select one of its artists to exhibit something of global importance in a global context is extraordinary."



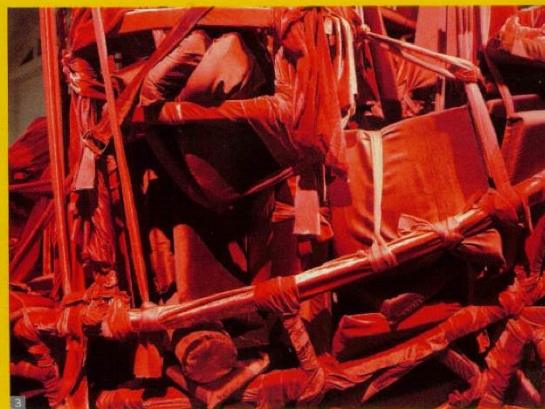
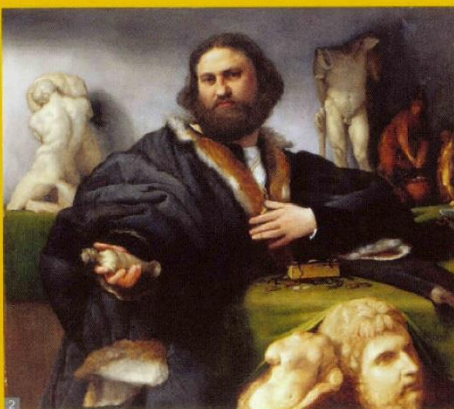
Above: Two works by Fiona Hall, 4. *(Macrocystis angustifolia/kelp)*, 2007; and 5. *Endings are Beginnings*, 2 painted long t



Shoal, a 2015 installation by Jose Tence Ruiz in collaboration with Danilo Ilag-ilag and Jeremy Guiab et al.

SALVATORE SETTIS Curator, Fondazione Prada, "Portable Classic"

"Variety in perspective and experimentation are at the very center of the Venice Biennale," says Settis, who was trained as a classical archaeologist and has served as director of both the Getty Research Institute and the Scuola Normale Superiore in Pisa. He is that rare breed of scholar who is as well versed in the convoluted and highly charged politics of patronage in matters of cultural heritage in Italy as he is in the rich artistic traditions that have emerged there over the past two millennia. Both areas of expertise inform "Portable Classic," Settis's exhibition delving into the manner in which Greco-Roman precepts have been appropriated and reinterpreted by artists from the Renaissance to Neoclassicism, on view at the Fondazione Prada's Venice venue at Ca' Corner della Regina. Since taking over that palazzo as a staging ground to show selections from its collection in 2011, the private foundation has invested heavily in mounting exhibitions—including a 2013 restaging of Harald Szeemann's 1969 show "When Attitudes Become Form"—with the aim of providing gravitas and context both for the contemporary art on view at the Biennale, and for the foundation's own efforts to assemble a museum-worthy contemporary collection. After noting the success of the Biennale Architettura in Venice last summer—which was curated by Rem Koolhaas, the design mastermind behind Prada's new Milan digs, where Settis is curator of "Serial Classic" as a companion to his Venice show—he observes that both biennales "have increasingly focused on the exploration of new scenarios and languages."



Above: 3. Shoal, a 2015 installation by Jose Tence Ruiz in collaboration with Danilo Ilag-ilag and Jeremy Guiab et al.

LOREN LEGARDA Cultural Impresario, Philippine Pavilion, "Tie a String Around the World"

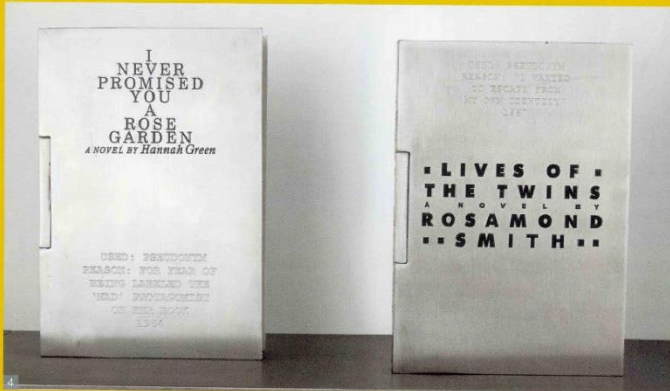
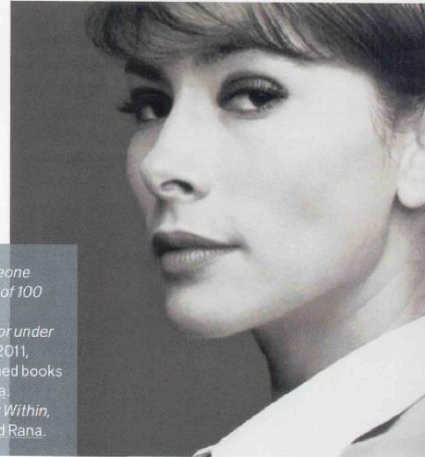
With its long history and global scope, the Venice Biennale can inspire sweeping ambition in people. Take Senator Legarda, who has returned the Philippines to the event after a half-century absence. "A national pavilion not only presents the work of its curator and artists but also uses that space to communicate with the world," Legarda says. "We want the country to use this as a platform to engage the international community on the cultural level." A child of art collectors, Legarda wrote her thesis on the Cubist painter Vicente Manansala. She used a subcommittee role overseeing budgets for the Department of Foreign Affairs and the Cultural Center of the Philippines to initiate a search for funding in 2013, and by last year she was sitting on a six-member international jury reviewing 16 exhibition proposals. The final selection from curator Patrick Flores gives a nod to the country's long hiatus by setting Manuel Conde's *Genghis Khan*, which screened at the 1952 Venice Film Festival, in dialogue with new artworks from media artist Jose Tence Ruiz and filmmaker Mariano Montelibano III. "I wanted to focus on the robust modernity of Philippine art that mediates the global and the contemporary," says Flores. Legarda, who is committed to seeing the country return in future years, wants something more. "Art should be an enabler of development and is an important facet of nation building," she says. "I hope that this will promote a cultural renaissance in the Philippines."

TOP TO BOTTOM: FROM LEFT, FONDATIONE PRADA, VENICE; MANUSCRIPT, VENICE; ROYAL COLLECTION, LONDON; BUTTERSAMMI (JENNIFER AND GUPTESHA), VENICE; ROYAL COLLECTION

FEROZE GUJRAL Director, Gujral Foundation, "My East Is Your West"

"I have been going to Venice for many years now and thinking, why doesn't India participate," says Gujral, founder of the family foundation that promotes culture both at home and abroad. "Finally I thought, why am I waiting for the government? Let me do the best I can myself." That effort turned into one of the most anticipated presentations at the Biennale, an official collateral event featuring the work of Shilpa Gupta from India and Rashid Rana from Pakistan. Gujral began investigating the idea of helping India to set up a pavilion when Massimiliano Gioni, the curator of the last Biennale, asked her to look into it. Though that effort did not come to fruition, the months spent researching a proposal for the ministry of culture, together with her experience sponsoring the Kochi-Muziris Biennale, which just concluded its second outing, prepared her for this year's independently produced exhibition. The idea of joining India with its sometime regional rival Pakistan in one pavilion came about in large part because Gujral met Rana at the 2013 Biennale, where they both lamented the lack of South Asia's representation. So when Gujral decided to mount a show, Rana was one of the first people she thought to call. Asked if she intended for this project both to signal India's joining the international art establishment and to tweak that establishment's long-standing nation-state model, Gujral laughed, saying, "It wasn't some big plan, but it works." 田

Below: 4. *Someone Else-A Library of 100 books written anonymously or under pseudonyms*, 2011, a series of etched books by Shilpa Gupta; 5. *Detail of War Within*, 2013, by Rashid Rana.



WHERE TO SEE THEIR EXHIBITIONS



KATERINA GREGOS
"Personne et les autres: Vincent Meessen and Guests"
Belgian Pavilion, Sestiere Castello in Giardini

SHEIKHA HOOR AL QASIMI
"1980- Today: Exhibitions in the UAE"
United Arab Emirates Pavilion, Sale d'Armi, Castello in Arsenale

SIMON MORDANT
"Wrong Way Time: Fiona Hall"
Australian Pavilion, Sestiere Castello in Giardini

SUNDARAM TAGORE
"Frontiers Reimagined"
Museo di Palazzo Grimani, Ramo Grimani, 4858

SALVATORE SETTIS
"Portable Classic"
Prada Foundation, Ca' Corner della Regina, Santa Croce, 2214

LOREN LEGARDA
"Tie a String Around the World"
Philippines Pavilion, Palazzo Mora, Strada Nuova, 3659

FEROZE GUJRAL
"My East Is Your West"
Palazzo Benzon, San Marco 3917

OKWUI ENWEZOR
"All the World's Futures"
Sestiere Castello in Giardini and Castello in Arsenale