

# ArtReview

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Venice Biennale

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## Artists with Borders

*by Robert Barry*



Transnationalism seems to be one of the essential qualities of whatever it is we mean by 'contemporary art'.

Why then does one of its biggest showcases insist on national entries? Is it just to entice artists to screw such notions up?



above *Borrando la Frontera (Erasing the Border)*, 2011,  
digital still from five-hour performance on Tijuana/San Diego border, performance documentation.  
Courtesy Gallery Wendi Norris, San Francisco

facing page Hans Haacke, *GERMANIA* (installation view), German Pavilion, Venice Biennale, 1993.  
Photo: Roman Mensing. © the artist / vG Bild-Kunst.  
Courtesy the artist and Paula Cooper Gallery, New York



On 14 June 2011 Ana Teresa Fernández walked up to the us-Mexico border at Playas de Tijuana and began painting its imposing struts in a wan sky-blue. After a few hours, at least when seen from a certain angle and in a certain light, a considerable swathe of the frontier seemed to have vanished, as its new coat of paint matched the receding sea, shore and sky behind. Fernández's *Borrando la Frontera* (*Erasing the Border*, 2011) makes conspicuously manifest one of the more glibly utopian powers commonly attributed to art in the twenty-first century: that of being able to make national borders and the strictures of political geography seem to vanish, rendering the world at once vaster and more intimate.

On course to becoming something of a cliché, this ideal makes the Venice Biennale, with its quasi-colonial division by national pavilions, seem all the more anachronistic in an age of seemingly unstoppable high-speed global information flows. Two years ago, when I interviewed Anri Sala, an Albanian artist living in Berlin who in that year was in Venice representing France but doing so (due to a mutually agreed swap) in the German Pavilion, he and his curator, Christine Macel, agreed that the question of nationality and national representation was essentially irrelevant. "We are in a postnational time in the artworld," Macel told me, in a manner suggesting this was so obvious as to barely require comment. So why, when other biennials have dropped it, does Venice persist with the national model?

The origins of the Venice Biennale go back to the late nineteenth century. Founded in 1895 and initially planned as a showcase for Italian art, the exhibition soon broadened its attentions to the rest of the world. The first national pavilions were built from 1907, starting with Belgium, followed by Hungary, Germany, Britain, France and Sweden. The model for such a system came direct from the World Expos of the preceding decades. In 1855, the French Exposition Universelle had

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staged the first international exhibition of painting, but it did so in a manner little different to the way Britain's Great Exhibition four years earlier had presented industrial gadgets and gizmos. Here was the world under one roof, precursor to our own dear shopping malls, wherein European nations no longer at war (at least for a little while) advertised their wares for the facilitation of international trade.

In the words of Anthony D. Smith's *The Nation Made Real: Art and National Identity in Western Europe, 1600–1850* (2013), art in this period had 'helped to make the abstract notions of "nation" and "national identity" palpable and accessible to the educated classes'. So John Constable's *Flatford Mill* (*Scene on a Navigable River*) (1816–7), with its well-groomed meadows and earthy rural types, had conjured up a mythical 'British Arcadia', the very image of Blake's 'green and pleasant land'. J.M.W. Turner's *The Fighting Temeraire* (1839), depicting a boat used in the Battle of Trafalgar, offered up a nostalgic evocation of past military triumphs.

Through such emotive images, painting made the sense of a national British culture feel more palpable to a class then engaged in exporting that culture – by force, if necessary – to colonies in Asia and beyond. But at the end of the century, for nations seeking independence – like Norway and Hungary – or newly united nations – like Italy and Germany – art acted as a powerful beacon capable of rallying popular energies to a common cause and common identity. In the case of Hungary, the building of a national pavilion at Venice in 1909 actually preceded the birth of an independent Hungary.

A hundred years later, however, the national model was increasingly coming in for a kicking. Hans Haacke's famous assault on the floor of the German Pavilion in 1993 seemed to symbolise the wrecking of more than just a particular building. In the same year, Biennale director Achille Bonito Oliva initiated a trend of encouraging national participants to select a combination of homegrown and foreign talent.

John Constable, *Flatford Mill* (*Scene on a Navigable River*), 1816–7, oil on canvas, 102 x 127 cm. © Tate, London 2015

Numbers of competing biennials and art fairs were growing exponentially across the globe, few of which followed the national model (the last to do so, the Bienal de São Paulo, gave up on its country-specific representation in 2006). In a climate of intellectual postmodernism and general post-Cold War global togetherness, thinking about artworks in terms of the arbitrary lines on a map that happened to encircle the particular place and time of an artist's birth suddenly seemed altogether unbefitting. But as Vittorio Urbani pointed out to me, these criticisms – coinciding with the opening up of the Biennale to greater participation from non-Western nations – tended to come, for the most part, from “smarter Northern European countries”.

Urbani manages a nonprofit association called Nuova Icona. Based in Venice, since 1993 Nuova Icona has collaborated in producing the national participation at the Biennale of several smaller, more marginalised nations, from Finland and Wales to Azerbaijan and the Lebanese Republic. In 2009 it played a critical role in the inclusion of Palestine in the 53rd Biennale. This was a project fraught with difficulties, not least the refusal of the Biennale's directors to bestow the exhibition with the title of ‘pavilion’, as this would imply diplomatic recognition of a Palestinian state on the part of the Italian government. In the end *Palestine c/o Venice* was called a ‘collateral event’, a title with some unfortunate military resonances for a nation under a permanent state of siege. Then a project by Emily Jacir to append Arabic transliterations to each stop on the local water-bus routes was cancelled at the last minute by the mayor of Venice, Massimo Cacciari. “I don't want to talk about a plot against it,” Urbani told me, “but there were problems.”

Chatting with Urbani via Skype, I started to get a sense of the different meanings taking part in something like the Venice Biennale could hold for countries outside the mainstream of artistic production and exchange. This year Nuova Icona is working on the Iraq Pavilion. Urbani recalled a conversation with his cocommissioner, the Iraqi historian Tamara Chalabi, in which she explained how depressing it

is for ordinary Iraqis that the only images of their country in the international media tend to be marching soldiers, grief-stricken women and bullet-ridden cars. “We may not have a country called Iraq next year,” she said to him when they first spoke about organising the pavilion last year. For Urbani, this is a truly political act: “to make a pavilion on the edge of a disaster”.

I got a similar sense from talking to other representatives of marginalised nations. For Wu Tien-chang, whose solo exhibition will make up the Taiwanese participation this year, the importance of such an event lies in the debate it generates within the country on the changing status of Taiwanese identity. Charles Lim, whose *Sea State* project (2005–15) occupies the Singaporean Pavilion, told me that “when there is an exhibition of Southeast Asian art in Europe or North America, it is often in a group-show format. Very rarely does one hear about a Southeast Asian artist having a major solo exhibition in Europe. The national pavilions in Venice, for better or for worse, provide that platform.” A similar attitude was expressed by Chus Martínez, curator to a Catalonian national collateral event. The best way to break the sclerotic national tradition is by expanding it: only through “the proliferation of other pavilions” do you gradually “break that idea of a nation”.

But at the end of the day, the situation in Iraq remains precarious and Palestine seems further than ever from statehood. Under such circumstances, the simple act of getting artists out of their countries to come to Venice can be, as Urbani told me, “a nightmare”. Mongolia, hosting its own national pavilion for the first time this year, had to resort to an Indiegogo campaign to finance travel and materials (when it closed on 8 March, Mongolia had reached less than 2 percent of its \$50,000 goal). If art can sometimes seem as transnational as the financial system from which it is increasingly inextricable, actual flesh-and-blood people continue to present a limiting factor. No matter how well Ana Teresa Fernández painted that Mexican border, it remained just as impassable for anyone stuck on the wrong side. ar



Enkhbold Togmidshirev, performance,  
Time and Space Festival, Jeju Island, South Korea, 2010.  
Photo: Enkhjargal Ganbat. Courtesy the artist