In Venice, no man is an island

War. Slavery. Refugees... The Biennale is using national pavilions to face down international crises

By Sophie Hastings

To present contemporary art through a series of national pavilions seems anachronistic in our globalised age. A jumble of architecturally incongruous buildings like tiny embassies dotted about a Venetian garden is not a natural context for groundbreaking work. It feels small and banal, like more UKIP than U-turn. Yet the design team behind the Biennale’s pavilion continues to resonate with and resonate in Sarah Lucas, who plumbed a loo on the ICA gallery in 1989. Lucas is representing Britain at this year’s Venice Biennale and may or may not fill her pavilion with toilets, rude jokes and jokes on tabloid culture: it’s under wraps for now. Paradoxically, it is her quintessential Britiness – irreverent, class-consciousness and all – that makes Lucas universal.

Artists override the eschewed concept of the Venice Biennale, but the curator’s role is crucial too. Nigerian-born scholar Okwui Enwezor, 51, whose job it has been to curate Documenta, “the Mount Olympus of exhibitions”, in 2002, and is currently director of Haus der Kunst in Munich. His theme for the 56th Venice Biennale: “All the World’s Futures”. By placing the Gardino at the centre of the disordered world, Enwezor hopes to “grasp the current disquiet of our time”, and at least two of his events are resonant with conflict and torture.

Tamara Chalabi, chair of the Iraq Foundation for Contemporary Culture in Iraq, returns to Venice having commissioned the 2013 pavilion: “All people know of Iraq is the ancient civilisation and Mesopotamia or the war – we want to look at what is in between,” she says. After its targeted by the Yeudi community in August 2014, displacing 1.6 million people, Chalabi and her fellow founders visited four Yeudi refugee camps in Iraq with art materials, and asked them to express themselves. “The response was unbelievable silence descend,” she says. They collected 500 works and will show them in a curated slide show. Chalabi is also working on a book of the drawings with Al Weisb, who has agreed to endorse the project.

Meanwhile, the historically interventional artists of India and Pakistan collaborate at Palazzo Benzon, in Venice. Neither country has a permanent pavilion and many citizens felt “worried and ashamed” by this, says Parek Gurr, of the Gurr Foundation. “My East In Your West” brings acclaimed artists Shilpa Gupta (India) and Rashid Rana (Pakistan) together to “express the essence of a people divided”, says Gupta. “They’re near, but you can’t cross the borders without a visa so they couldn’t work together physically. They used the concept of podcasting – a form meant by a twisted and external call and response. “At a time when the Nobel Peace Prize was won by a Pakistani girl, this is a timely project about soft power. We will place a magnificent artwork on the roof so that everyone can see us from a vaporetto.”

Follow your ears from the Ca’ d’Oro vaporetto stop and you will find the new location for Scotland’s pavilion, the Palazzo Fontana. A sound-clash of classical and Balkan music will pour on to the Grand Canal but inside, viewers will be sure if the musical arrangement is art-related. “Until they reach the fourth floor – they’ll see it differently,” says artist Graham Page, who is under some pressure, given that his predecessor, Duncan Campbell, won the 2014 Turner Prize on the strength of his project. Page’s installation is a journey through sculpture, drawing and painting, culminating in audio-visual collaborations with composer Sally Beamish, club producer Adrian Sherwood and reggae star Horace Andy. A recasting of Robert Burns’ 1792 song, “The Slave’s Lament”, is testament to Page’s preoccupation with the slave trade, history and counter-history. “In the past, I’ve used trees, poisons, rope and even hung a real guy off a tree,” he says. “Here, I’ve made a tree of rope cast in bronze. I’m looking at the social and political history of trade with a new nod to Venice.”

Naturally, the door handles shaped as negro heads that abound in Venetian interiors and the blackamoors in souvenir shops. Chalabi describes Iraq’s cultural development as having been “top-sided, internalised, such a difficult country to access.” But there is darkness at the heart of every nation and if we need pavilions on a gilded island to examine “the current state of things”, as Enwezor would have it, then perhaps Venice is indeed all the world’s futures.