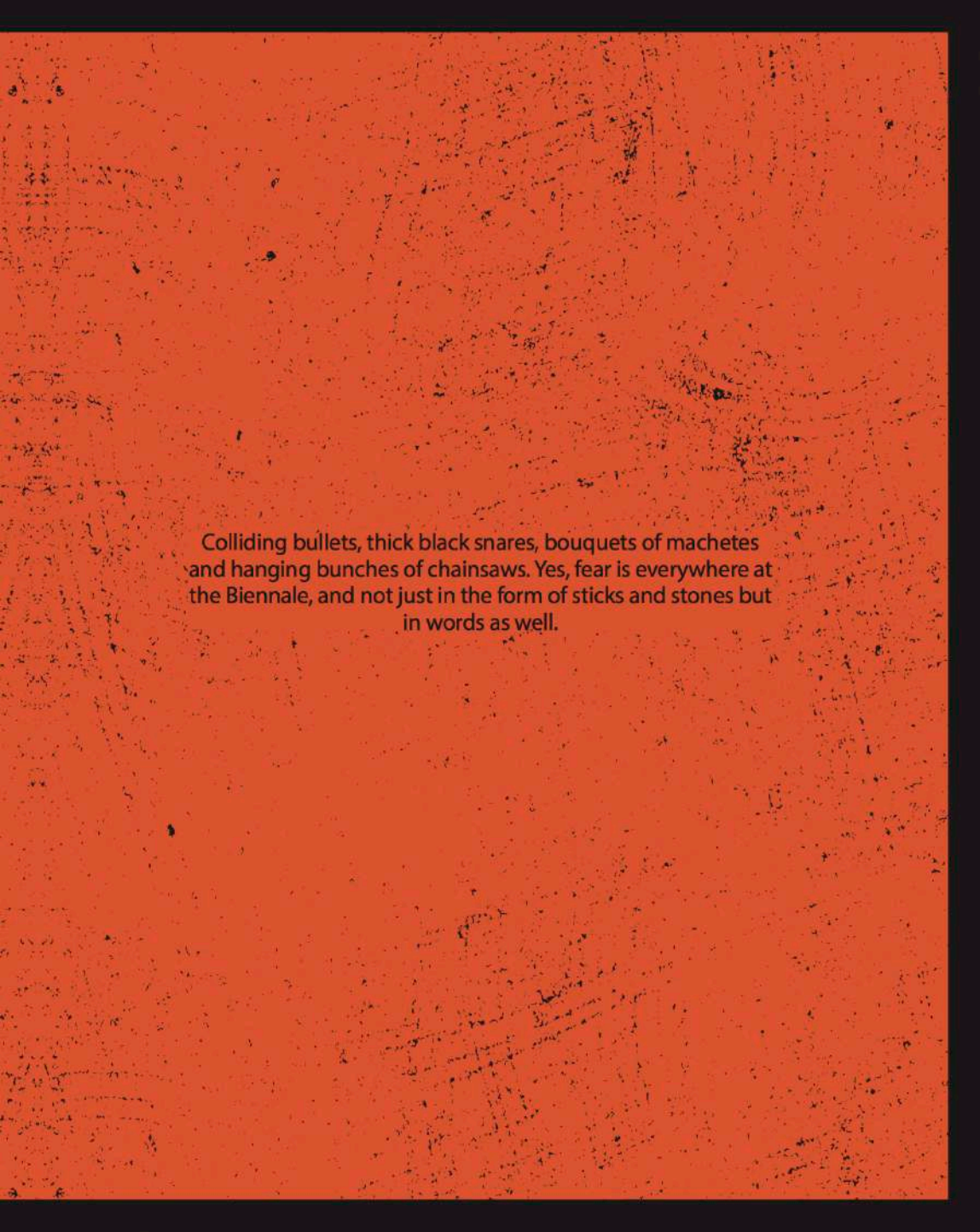


ART AND CULTURE FROM THE MIDDLE EAST AND ARAB WORLD

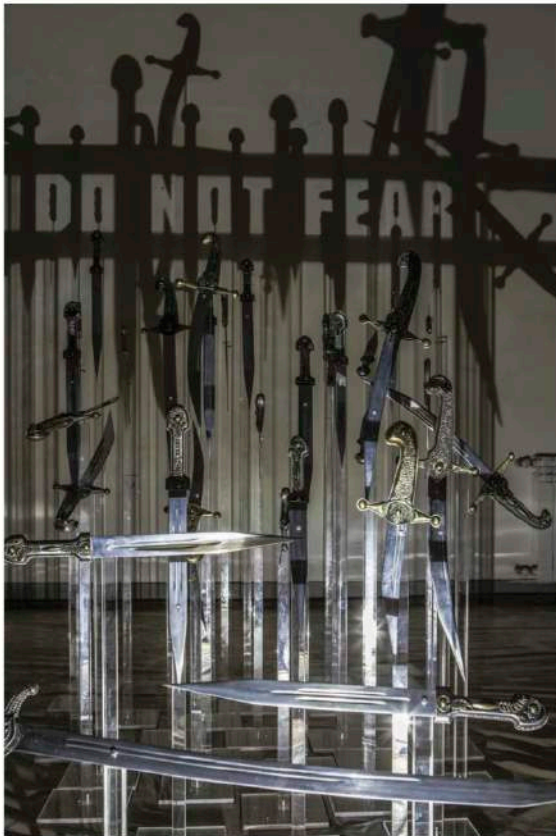
ISSN 1814-7062
9 771814 706006



FEAR AND LOATHING

The image features a solid orange background with a fine, grainy texture. A thin black border is visible around the edges of the orange area. Centered in the lower half of the image is a block of text in a black, sans-serif font.

Colliding bullets, thick black snares, bouquets of machetes
and hanging bunches of chainsaws. Yes, fear is everywhere at
the Biennale, and not just in the form of sticks and stones but
in words as well.



DO NOT FEAR RASHAD ALAKBAROV THE UNION OF FIRE AND WATER

Is there anything with more ability to send mixed signals than the pseudo-Biblical command 'Do Not Fear', splashed across a wall in sinister shadow? Probably not – unless you traced the shadow back to the light thrown on an arsenal's worth of sabres and daggers – then you'd be pretty scared. The clear Plexiglas stands on which the blades are balanced reflect the light in different ways, allowing it to bleed through into the shadows they cast, giving off the appearance of dripping blood. It is precisely this intriguing relationship that Azeri artist Rashad Alakbarov has with space that allows him to re-appropriate objects into new, artistic trajectories.

But what, one asks, is there to fear? "There is probably something to fear," ponders Alakbarov. "In our current situation everyone is afraid of everything. I guess the work invites viewers to look at things in a different perspective – here a knife does not necessarily imply violence, but rather a historic attribute." The blades used are found and bought daggers and swords sourced by the artist, and he uses them to examine a rich and complex history comprising love and war, conflict and peace, and trade and prosperity between Venice and the Turkic world. The phrase he has chosen is, very literally, a double edged-sword. "If one is afraid, they will take this work as a threat," he says. "If one is open, they will see it differently. This work is more psychological than political – all our phobias are internal, and the current divide in opinion over Christoph Büchel's mosque installation (page 124) is indicative of that."



This spread (from left):
Installation view of Rashad
Alakbarov's *Do Not Fear*, 2015.
Daggers, swords, plexiglas,
metal and light source. 250 x
150 x 130 cm. Image courtesy
Arsen Pavilion; Akam Shex Hadi.
Untitled, 2014–15. Black and
white digital print on Innova-
Baryth Smoothgloss paper. 30 x
45 cm. Image courtesy the artist.

UNTITLED AKAM SHEX HADI IRAQI PAVILION

Subtly taking over a wall in the Iraqi Pavilion is a series of black-and-white photographs by young photographer Akam Shex Hadi. They show scenes from every day life, with weathered faces staring out at the viewer: a man stands beneath a great tree; a young father holds his toddler; an old, proud man stands against a skyline of laundry and a faded Mickey Mouse mural. They are joined by an old fortress outpost, a priest in his church, an old, *abaya*-clad woman standing amidst the hills. The one thing they all bear in common is the presence of a thick black rope – pooled and coiled around their feet, like a hunting snare.

COMMON GROUND

"Hadi's images of these people, all bound visually to one another by a long, thick cord, insist upon an urgency and humanity specific to Iraq's situation today," writes Seamus Kelly, Artistic Director of the Kunstverein in Salzburg, in the Pavilion's catalogue. "[They] speak about the violence without directly demonstrating it to us." Indeed, this insidious black cord, like some evil boa constrictor, snakes through each image, a dense, portent of blackness that mars the scene. An obvious metaphor for extremism, in particular the forward march of ISIS, threatening a noose around the necks of all those who come into contact with it.

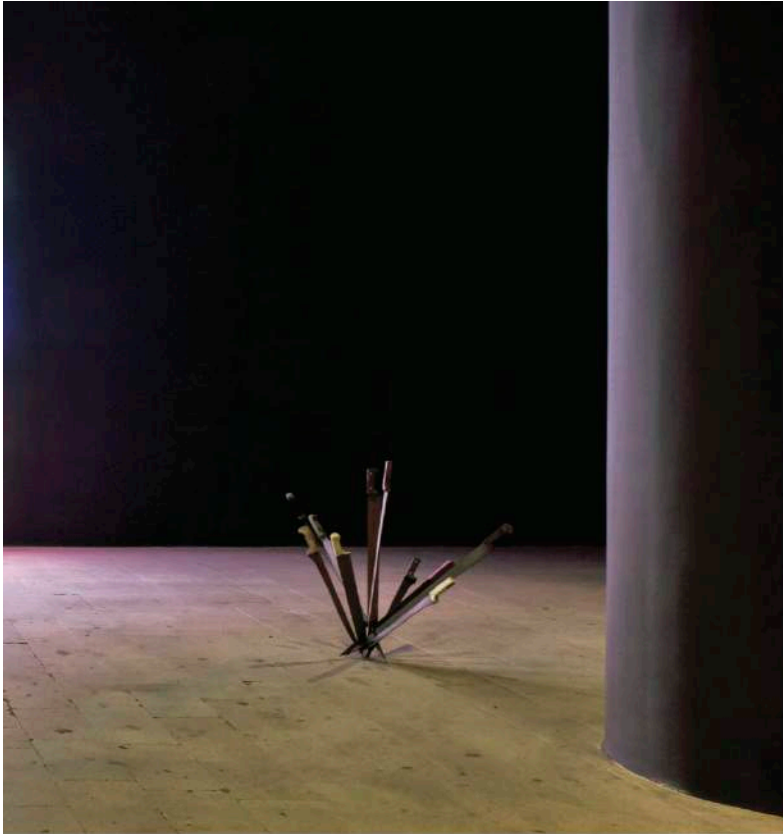
BRUCE NAUMAN & ADEL ABDESSEMED

ALL THE WORLD'S FUTURES, ARSENALE

It is certainly one heck of a way to enter a Biennale show: you round a corner and enter a vast, dark hall with your death in lights. Literally. In the Arsenale's section of *All The World's Futures*, visitors are greeted with what seems like a night-time desert scrubland – small aloe-like plants dot the landscape as a series of neon lights cover the walls, like so many sleazy motel and diner signs. American artist Bruce Nauman represented his native country at the 2009 Biennale, his trademark neon word art running along the parapets of the US Pavilion. This year, the walls are splashed with some of Nauman's work from the 1970s and '80s, including *Human Nature/Life Death/Knows Doesn't Know* (1983) and *Eat Death* (1972). Part of his fascination with the written word – of language, puns, idioms and double meanings – is by illuminating and overlaying words and phrases that he, in a sense, burns into your brain, like a branding by fire.

When Nauman first began working with neon tubing and lighting, he was a pioneer in its use, previously reserved almost exclusively to industrial or commercial settings. Today it is a popular material for artists – think Cerith Wyn Evans or Robert Montgomery – and this is a satisfying chance to see pieces by one of the original forefathers of the medium. It is not just lighting and tubing, that is material, says Nauman, but language itself.

Meanwhile, Algerian Abdessemed is no stranger to shocking audiences. In addition to his striking *Thus Sprach Allah*, further into the Arsenale, here his *Nymphaeas* (Water Lilies) carry on his tradition of sensitive



COMMON GROUND

Installation view of (background) Bruce Nauman, *Human Nature/Life/Death/ Know Doan't Know*, 1983. Neon, 273.06 x 271.78 x 14.61 cm and (foreground) Adel Abdessamed, *Nymphéar*, 2015. Grouping of knives. Variable dimensions.

Image courtesy la Biennale di Venezia

involved are laden with historical significance. Both are icons of the Cold War, and both have been seen as symbols of freedom: the M16 by the Americans, and the AK-47 (aka Kalashnikov) by the Soviets as a symbol of revolution. What, asks The Propeller Group, happens when these two sworn enemies meet and are forced into a violent dialogue? These "weapons of peace" continue their march across the globe and are still very much in use today. Can they ever force two warring sides to unite, fused in peace like two melting bullets, or are they only ever objects for ripping, tearing and gouging? Can peace ever be born through violence?

What is even more interesting is that of the two videos on display alongside the gel block, the first shows a misfire, with the AK-47 going through but the M16 not triggering. It is in the second video, and the second shot, that the collision is captured. The gel block is the kind used by the FBI for their forensic tests, and created to mimic the density of human tissue. It bears the scars of what The Propeller Group member Tuan Andrew Nguyen refers to as "surreal destruction".

RACIST IN SOUTH AFRICA WILLEM BOSHOF SOUTH AFRICAN PAVILION

For its 2015 edition, curators Jeremy Rose and Christopher Till of the South African Pavilion decided to take a leaf from Okwui Enwezor's *All The World's Futures* and examine it from a South African perspective. *What remains is tomorrow* brings together 14 artists in a variety of media, from photography and film to mixed media installations, in order to examine how the past can come back to haunt the present. The artists selected to represent South Africa delve into its complex history and present to deal with violence, imperialism, colonialism, money, power and the country's ongoing race issues and xenophobia. "If we are to understand our contemporary moment, and plot our future so that it is more equitable, just and humane than the present," write the curators in their statement, "[then] we must grapple once more with our history."

COMMON GROUND

I AM PROUD TO BE LABELLED RACIST IN SOUTH AFRICA IF IT MEANS THAT

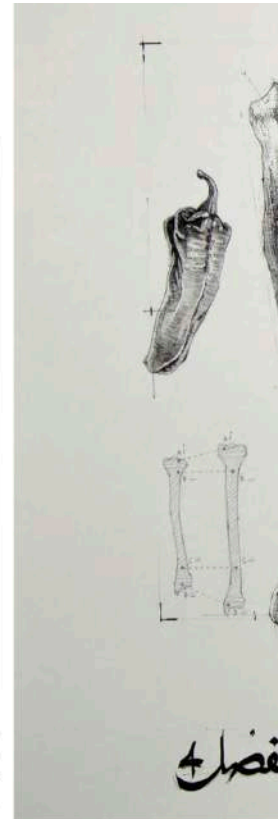
I am revolted by ineffective, dim-witted 4 X 4 politicians
I am shocked that countless farm murders go unchallenged
I loathe it when the police take bribes without being punished
I am dismayed that unemployment and poverty keep getting worse
I am disgusted that education is so poorly managed and neglected
I appreciate security walls, electrical fences, alarms and guard dogs
I detest crime and criminals, no matter what the colour of their skin
My temper rises when violent car-jackings are not brought under control
I am afraid for the lives of my children when they walk out onto the street
I fly into a rage when sport teams are forced to select undeserving players
My blood boils when the police hoodwink us with false or no crime statistics
I find it intolerable that politicians line their own pockets at the expense of the poor
I view bankruptcy in metropolitan councils as a fraudulent waste of taxpayers' money
I become infuriated when objections to administrative incompetence are ignored
I am repulsed that money is wasted on useless military aircraft and submarines
I am appalled at the shocking and inadequate treatment in public hospitals
I can't stand that more and more tourists are avoiding us like the plague
I could scream in frustration when jobs are given to unqualified people
I feel insulted that a cold shower after sex is believed to prevent aids
I find it insufferable that my country is the rape capital of the world
I fume when thousands of destitute aids orphans live without care
I weep when villains' rights are protected more than their victims
I find the severe, prolonged power failures unacceptable
I totally detest corruption by government officials

One such work is Willem Boshoff's text piece, *Racist in South Africa*. Born in 1951, the Johannesburg-based artist works with words made from concrete, sculptures and installations, with evolving works that re-appropriate objects and histories to encyclopaedic proportions. In this piece, he grapples with his frustrations at what he sees as a never-ending wave of violent and unjust crime perpetuated by bad government, maladministration and hypocrisy. As one of the cruxes of the piece, he cites the occasion of South Africa's modest success at the 2012 London Olympics. That same year, as South Africa finished 23rd on the medals table, it also had the ninth-highest homicide rating worldwide, and was second-highest (after Honduras) in terms of murders per capita. There is also the issue of rape. A 2010 survey revealed that only the USA had more reported rapes than South Africa, yet the former country has a population six times that of the latter. "We are the top country when it comes to rape," says Boshoff. "It upset me terribly when I learnt that the average South African woman stands a far better chance of being raped, some of them being raped repeatedly, than learning to read and write. I thought we were a democracy, but with a president lucky to escape the rape charge brought against him, it turns out that we are a veritable phallocracy."

Avoiding the use of words such as 'black' or 'white' in his piece, Boshoff uses this work to draw attention to the

deep injustices that affect South African society and how a lack of culpability by government officials sees anybody who criticises or reproaches this failing criticised or ostracised. Boshoff points out the omission of Archbishop Desmond Tutu from the funeral of Nelson Mandela, after he spoke out publicly against corruption and crime in the country. By addressing these issues, Boshoff hopes to encourage debate and force audiences to face the reality of when human rights are being violated. "Of course I am not a racist. The very idea of unfair discrimination against others, for whatever reason, deeply offends and nauseates me," says Boshoff. "But then, my artwork says I am proud to be labelled a 'racist', not that I am proud to be one. I say this under duress because I, and so many others in South Africa, have been branded 'racist' by inept politicians, particularly by our former president, Thabo Mbeki, and the current one, Jacob Zuma."

In this sense, the items listed in *Racist in South Africa* are those that can earn one this 'racist' label, even if the motivation to eradicate them is 'good and honourable if one understands that one has a social duty to eradicate crime, lack of education and training, breakdown of civil administration and so on,' says Boshoff. "Those who wish to see a better life for all ought to take a stand against the things that are messing up the country and their efforts should be applauded, not punished by disingenuous invective."





Above: Nidhal Chamekh, *Drawing No. 4*, 2013. Graphite and ink on paper, 42 x 60 cm. Image courtesy Selma Forani Gallery, Tunis.
Facing page: Detail of Willem Boshoff's *Recast In South Africa*, 2011. Anodised aluminium panel, engraved and filled with ink, 120 x 120 x 0.3 cm. Image courtesy the artist and the National Pavilion of South Africa.

DE QUOI RÊVENT LES MARTYRS NIDHAL CHAMEKH ALL THE WORLD'S FUTURES, ARSENALE

In his series of 12 ink and graphite on paper drawings, Tunisian artist Nidhal Chamekh presents us with a gruesome assemblage of anatomy drawings and deadly weapons. A femur and a shotgun hold court with a policeman's baton, the lifeless bodies of martyrs and detailed drawings of plants. Arabic script and scientific sketches present a dystopian vision of a world after the Arab Spring. Chamekh examines the upheavals that have taken place in the wake of the events of 2011 and their wider legacy, with a particular focus on the cost of not just material things, but on human life itself. Coming from a family of political activists, he probes the less glamorous realities of jihad and martyrdom, and probes the roots of dissent and revolution, such as the December 2010 self-immolation of a fruit vendor which went on to spark the riots that led to the Arab Spring. His use of montage creates

new visions of a world in chaos, asking us to re-examine what we thought we already knew.

The visual sources of the works are numerous and varied, with Chamekh drawing on the media to extract images from social and political events that he finds of interest. He also delved into political, scientific and art historical archives. "In this sense, several temporalities are overlapped within the same board of drawing, with all the relationships and analogies that can unfold out of it," Chamekh explains. By deconstructing and reconstructing this plethora of imagery, he provides a new experiential way of understanding current events.

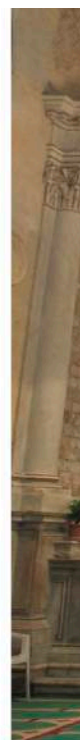
"My drawings tend explicitly to resemble a visual study which combines subject and object with an investigation, with knowledge," Chamekh explains. "I am interested in this process of study and note-taking – the idea of scientific charts, tests and observation allowing us a certain appreciation for the world that we might not otherwise notice. It is this richness of associations that I hope to combine to allow the imagination to be sparked in our observation of the world."

LATENT COMBUSTION MONICA BONVICINI

ALL THE WORLD'S FUTURES, ARSENALE

Italian artist Monica Bonvicini's work creates a powerful and critical discourse through which she deconstructs gender, power, architecture and their role within our modern, urban environment. Often working with industrial subjects, such as a glass-walled public toilet and S&M-inspired materials such as black latex and rubber, her work is mesmerising and powerful as well as sinister and full of subliminal energy. This sense of dormant power is evident in *Latent Combustion*, comprising chainsaws and an axe hung in a bundle from the ceiling and covered in dripping black polyurethane. In being hung up like so many hunks of meat, these dangerous objects collectively assume the appearance of a historic relic or fossil that has been dredged out of the bottom of a tar pit. Whilst this renders them harmless, neutered and emasculated, they retain a menacing aura.

"I was interested, as I often am, in the idea of transforming a real object into an art piece," explains Bonvicini. "The chainsaws would have been 'harmless' even if not dipped in black rubber, for that is always the case when working with ready-made objects. However, I wanted to create a powerful and loud 'collage' that, on one hand, is still readable as an assemblage of power tools, but on the other, avoids comparisons of any sort." In this sense, the work touches on issues of labour (both manual and intellectual), as well as capitalism, raising questions about the role of labour in a system in which computerised and mechanised procedures seem to be taking over. "I focused on what happens to tools once they are not used anymore," says Bonvicini. "*Latent Combustion* can be seen as a sort of relic, or like a dark Baroque chandelier."



THE MOSQUE CHRISTOPH BÜCHEL

ICELANDIC PAVILION

No art project at this year's biennale has received as much attention as Iceland-based Swiss artist Christoph Büchel's *THE MOSQUE*. Nor, does it seem, has a proposal for peace and understanding ever misfired quite so badly with this year's Icelandic national representation. It's a tough nut to crack. Hraig Vartanian, in his review, dubbed it "the type of

shocking gesture that gets attention and headlines... part of a troubling trend in Contemporary art... to create pieces that end up being amateur adventures into the highly specialised field of social work". Then, after only two weeks, the Venetian city authorities shut down *THE MOSQUE*, citing various violations, primarily its application as an art project, whereas they argued that it was a place of worship. This prompted many, including Anna Somers Cocks of *The Art Newspaper*, to question what impact this had on those who had been using it – the Muslim population itself. "It is worse to have something that has been given to you snatched away," she wrote, "than never to have had it at all." In fact, *THE MOSQUE* has so polarised opinion that even those who try to provide a balanced middle ground of the pros



Above: Installation view of the main prayer hall inside Christoph Büchel's *THE MOSQUE*, 2015.
Left: Monica Bonvicini, *Latera Combustion #1*, 2015. Chainsaws, black polyurethane, matte finish, steel chains. 300 x 135 cm. Image courtesy the artist, Galerie Peter Kleinsmann and Kornig Galerie.

and cons have been raked over hot coals. To laud the project is to encourage irresponsibility; to condemn it is to invite the wrath of those who see such a response as against free speech, tolerance and religious diversity. In fact, the furore caused by the closure of the pavilion prompted the commissioning Icelandic Art Center to publish an official statement on 27 May on its website in an attempt to clarify its position.

At the heart of maelstrom lies the issue, so eloquently raised by Iranian artist Nicky Nodjoumi at a recent talk at the British Museum, that "art should take responsibility." Büchel famously does not grant interviews, and has become known as something of a provocateur for creating site-specific projects such as a Viennese Swingers Club in the city's historic Secession exhibition hall and presenting the belongings of homeless people as sculptures at Frieze New York, not to mention the acrimonious fallout (including lawsuits) when his large-scale exhibition *Training Ground for Democracy* was opened without the artist's consent at the Massachusetts Museum of Contemporary Art after his relationship with the museum had soured midway through installation.

Büchel has taken over the space of the Santa Maria della Misericordia, a 10th century church that was deconsecrated in the 1970s. The use of a former church for

secular purposes is, in itself, nothing new, but the debate here has raged over whether *THE MOSQUE* is indeed an art project – as the artist and the IAC contend – or a religious venue, as the Venetian city authorities maintain. Working in collaboration with the Muslim communities of Iceland and Venice, Büchel's project features a *mihrab*, *minbar* and ablutions area, as well as its own *madrasa* (school). Details included a gigantic carpet, mosque lamps/chandelier and even a Mecca Cola vending machine. Upon entering, visitors followed the suggestion of removing their shoes to walk through the space, with optional coverings available for women.

At the core of the Pavilion's concept is the relationship between Iceland and Venice as two similar yet separate countries dealing with recent immigration, as well as the growth of resident Muslim populations. In Iceland itself, the road to building the first official Reykjavik Mosque has commanded much press attention in a country that is traditionally a Lutheran monoculture. Historically, Iceland has also been more isolated than Venice, which for centuries enjoyed extensive and lucrative trade contacts with the Middle East and Muslim world. Yet, Büchel points out, despite the existence of a prayer room on the island, and mosques on the mainland, there has – as yet – been no mosque constructed on the island of Venice itself.



In 2011, the Iceland Pavilion presented Libia Castro and Ólafur Ólafsson, probing social and political issues both inside and outside Iceland. In 2013 Katrín Sigurdardóttir created an architectural intervention at the Old Laundry, so there is a precedent to both the architectural and social elements of Büchel's project. Interestingly, it was chosen through a call for applications to artists to submit proposals for the Biennale. This was a break in tradition for the IAC, which had previously autonomously selected which artist should represent them. *Canvas* spoke with the Pavilion's curator, Nina Magnúsdóttir, about *THE MOSQUE* and the ensuing fallout.

What piqued Büchel's interest in creating a mosque in Venice?

Christoph always works quite site-specifically and roots his concepts in the history of each given location. He was interested in the idea of the exponential (although still low in numbers) immigration of people to Iceland, and the small Muslim population's struggle there to build a mosque – the first, not just in Reykjavik, but in Iceland. There is also the history of segregation that goes with immigration issues – look at the Jewish ghetto in Venice, for example – as well as the history of commerce. In a way, that is what Venice has always been about, and maybe

still is. So there is the role of the Middle East and Islam in the commercial success of Venice in the past, and now it is one of the Contemporary art world's epicentres. Yet there is no mosque and there are still issues with immigration. These all served as starting points.

How big is the immigration/mosque building issue in Iceland?

Over the last few years it has come up in the headlines quite a lot. There is a sense in Iceland that immigration – and tourism – are taking off exponentially and it raises questions amongst the local inhabitants of how to adapt and deal with this changing cultural fabric. In that sense it also resonates with Venice, albeit on a different scale.

How closely did Büchel work with the Muslim community on this project?

He was adamant from the start that the project be executed with the help of both the Icelandic and Venetian Muslim communities. We visited the community in Iceland, and from the beginning they were interested in getting involved. We first met with the Muslim population of Venice in December and they were obviously a little suspicious, asking why we wanted to do this and what we really wanted from them and from this platform.



This spread:
Installation views of Büchel's
THE MOSQUE, 2015.

What changed their minds?

The Charlie Hebdo massacre happened in Paris, and all of the spaces that we were scoping out for *THE MOSQUE* were suddenly shut in our faces. Nobody wanted to participate in anything like this, but the Muslim community discussed it amongst themselves and rallied, deciding now, more than ever, that it was time to open up their community to the world in order to promote understanding.

Büchel has stated explicitly that *THE MOSQUE* is an art project, yet the Muslim community held prayers there. The Venetian authorities now consider it as a place of worship – which is it?

You can never foresee exactly how a project will play out as, in a sense, it's a living thing. Things like this are tricky. The

COMMON GROUND

Muslim community in Venice has been working towards getting a mosque built and when we opened *THE MOSQUE*, some members of the public came up to the artist and told him, "This could never have happened, not with all the money in the world, but it was able to happen through art." You can never foresee or control people's reactions or how they will interact with an art project. It's clearly an art project, being a national pavilion.

You are actively seeking to reopen the Pavilion – what are the challenges?

We had rented this space for the duration of the Biennale, and it was to include a community centre to create audience engagement, as well as an educational programme. However, the political situation in Venice plays a major role, as there has not been a mayor in Venice for a year. The recent election had no clear majority outcome, so the fate of *THE MOSQUE* depends partly on the views of the winning candidate. We also want to access the documents the government has filed to see what the reasons are for our closure. We have done everything required legally, as far as we are aware.

Say the Pavilion hadn't been closed, or you manage to reopen it for the remainder of the Biennale. What happens to the people who would come to use this as their place of prayer? Were there plans to move it elsewhere?

The artist had only planned as far as the seven months of the Biennale itself, and that is how long we have secured the rented space for. Obviously, we are collaborating with the local Muslim community in order to use the space for educational and social purposes, as an Islamic cultural centre. Hopefully something good will come out of this – perhaps it will help the community in the process of building a real, permanent mosque in the city. I hope it encourages the Muslim community to open up to both the international and the art community. The Biennale's official standpoint has been an interesting one, and very 'hands off' to date.

So, where does this leave things? Issues always arise when one entity flies the flag for another – is it one party's battle 'to fight', as it were? Did Büchel think through the ramifications of this project? How do intention and reality work together? Could a Muslim artist potentially present a Christian artistic/religious intervention within the Middle East without a similar outcome to that faced by Büchel in Venice? Just how far does the responsibility of an artist extend, and will the Muslim community of Venice ultimately gain or lose in the war between Büchel and the Venetian authorities? Have the latter overreacted? There are many questions, but not quite as many answers – not yet, at least. [M]