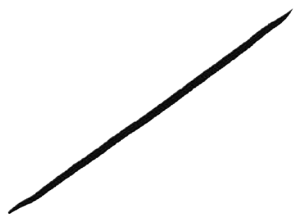


VENICE BIENNALE: A FORM OF CULTURAL HERITAGE? A DIALOGUE FROM AND WITHIN A UNIQUE URBAN CONTEXT

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Abstract: The Venice Biennale is arguably the world's most important art exhibition, with the 2022 edition attracting over 800,000 visitors. The rich artistic offer of the event stands against the backdrop of a UNESCO World Heritage city whose historical, cultural and artistic values are both its blessing and its curse—a place like no other, where the murmur of water echoing along the canals is often drowned by the sound of swarms of tourists, much to the despair of locals, who are driven to leave their city. How does an event like the Biennale juxtapose with such a setting? To what extent, considering its environment (or not), does it become a form of cultural heritage in itself? How does it address the tension between the attempt to capture the essence of relevant contemporary social issues and the duty to upkeep a certain legacy? And how could this reflect on the city, its heritage or its inhabitants? This paper aims to open a discussion at the intersection of cultural heritage and arts.

Keywords: Biennale, cultural heritage, Authorized Heritage Discourse, art, dialogue.

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Introduction

The Venice Biennale (La Biennale di Venezia, the International Art Exhibition) is the oldest event of this type, its first edition going back to 1895. The Biennale prides itself on its capacity to anticipate artistic trends while simultaneously providing fresh and innovative contexts for artists and their works to be showcased (La Biennale di Venezia, 2023). According to Clarissa Ricci, the Venice Biennale “can claim longevity, a constant presence and an ongoing process of revision with regard to the contemporary situation” (2010, p. 3). In addition to its importance on the world artistic scene, La Biennale is set against the background of the city of Venice, which, alongside its Lagoon, was inscribed in 1987 on the UNESCO World Heritage List—a decision backed by the fulfilment of no less than six criteria.¹

1 In order for a site to be inscribed on the UNESCO World Heritage List, it needs to be of outstanding universal value (OUV) and meet a minimum of six out of the ten selection criteria. The six criteria in question are: “(i) to represent a masterpiece of human creative genius; (ii) to exhibit an important interchange of human values, over a span of time or within a cultural area of the world, on developments in architecture or technology, monumental arts, town-planning or landscape design; (iii) to bear a unique or at least exceptional testimony to a cultural tradition or to a civilization which is living or which has disappeared; (iv) to be an outstanding example of a type of building, architectural or technological ensemble or landscape which illustrates (a) significant stage(s) in human history; (v) to be an outstanding example of a traditional human settlement, land-use, or sea-use which is representative of a culture (or cultures), or human interaction with the environment especially when it has become vulnerable under the impact of irreversible change; (vi) to be directly or tangibly associated with events or living traditions, with ideas, or with beliefs, with artistic and literary works of outstanding universal significance” (UNESCO 2023).

As enchanting as such a city can be, tensions have arisen due to overtourism, prompting some authors to refer to Venice as a “hyper-tourist city” (Costa and Martinotti, 2003). In 2019, Venice saw almost 4.8 million international tourist arrivals (Statista, 2022), a strong contrast to the historical centre’s 52,143 inhabitants at the time (Città di Venezia, 2023). This issue of overtourism thus stands in contradiction with one of the main goals of La Biennale, namely to attract as many visitors as possible to experience the art works in Giardini, Arsenale, and the collateral events and pavilions scattered throughout the city—the event’s 2022 edition broke all attendance records when it exceeded 800,000 tickets sold (La Biennale di Venezia, 2022). It could be argued that given the Biennale’s timeframe (May–November), i.e., off-peak tourist season, it could contribute to a form of more responsible tourism, in which tourists would engage with Venice off-season, and, by exploring the collateral events scattered throughout it, they would also reduce the pressure on various areas. This is also backed by the profile of the Biennale visitor, considered to be more actively engaged with the city’s culture and inclined to spend on hospitality in the centre of Venice (Gold and Gold, 2022).

Therefore, when approaching a massive cultural event such as La Biennale, it is worth inquiring, given its cultural impact and the cultural and historical particularities of its spatial setting, whether and how it has become a form of cultural heritage in itself. Furthermore, it is also worth exploring how such a possible form of cultural heritage engages in dialogue with arguably the dominant form of cultural heritage in the city of Venice, namely its built environment, as well as how it would impact the very city it emerges from.

Conceptual framework and methodology

In order to examine these topics, this paper draws on the literature produced at the intersection of cultural heritage and the arts, using the lens of critical heritage studies and the visitor experience of art and cultural heritage, while also considering the direct impacts of cultural heritage and large-scale cultural events. The motivation for this research endeavour emerged from the three weeks the author spent in November 2022 in Venice, two of which involved working as a cultural mediator at the Romanian Pavilion in Giardini della Biennale. As a researcher focused on cultural heritage, both from a theoretical and practical point of view, the author was able to use her experience to reflect on the Biennale. Furthermore, the author’s three-week stay in Venice proved to be very fruitful in terms of directly observing the dynamic between the Biennale public and the artworks, as well as that between the visitors and the city of Venice, which led to discussions with her peers on many of the topics included in this paper. The

author also kept track of the number of visitors entering the Romanian Pavilion throughout her two-week internship at the Giardini, and engaged in conversations with some of them on topics such as their views on Adina Pintilie's work,² as well as their experience of the event overall.

La Biennale di Venezia: setting and (heritage) values

La Biennale is situated in a setting with a rich, specific history (the city of Venice), its main venues, Giardini and Arsenale, being tangible testimonies of bygone eras—Arsenale, formerly the city's largest production site in pre-industrial times (specialising in maritime vessels for both warfare and trade), had its oldest components (Corderie) built in the fourteenth century (La Biennale di Venezia, 2023); Giardini was the result of applying specific concepts of urban planning in the nineteenth century, during the Napoleonic rule of the city (Vettese, 2010, p. 8). It is important at this point to acknowledge the role that the Biennale played in the urban regeneration processes at Arsenale, a site which had been in decline but whose heritage status excluded the possibility of demolition (Gold and Gold, 2022).



Figure 1. View of Arsenale, 17 November 2022.
Photo source: author's personal archive.

2 The project *You Are Another Me—A Cathedral of the Body* by Adina Pintilie, closely developed with curators Cosmin Costinaș and Viktor Neumann, consisted of a multi-channel film installation at the Romanian Pavilion in Giardini, complemented by a VR extension within the New Gallery of the Romanian Institute for Culture and Humanistic Research; the Pavilion was conceived as a site of reflection upon the body “as a device to process recognized and unrecognized history, trauma, and desires” (E-flux, 2022).

In addition, the national pavilions are specifically designed built items, with their own history. For example, the Pavilions at the southern limit of Giardini were built during Mussolini's regime, while the Nordic Pavilion is an architectural masterpiece by Sverre Fehn, a Norwegian architect whose body of work is generally considered to mark the shift from international style modernism to the late modernist or phenomenological turn—a response, in Nordic architecture, to what was perceived at the time as a “lack of contextual awareness” (Reaver, 2022, p. 2). Given that that the designs of many Biennale pavilions are signed by renowned architects, this confers them a heritage value that needs to be considered in view of possible future alterations (Reaver, 2022). Therefore, exhibiting contemporary art within such heritage-imbued spaces creates an “intersection of practices” with a significant degree of complexity (Cass et al., 2020, p. 3).

For Panos Kompatsiaris (2017), a contemporary art biennial is a site at the intersection of prestige, innovation, and experimentation, where the category of art is characterised by perpetual motion, rearrangement, and redefinition, exposing itself to the world and the various contradictions it encompasses. Such an event also opens itself up to “the world of politics and critical theory; to the world of business and creative branding; to the world of flexible labour and urban renewal; to the world of left-wing activism and social intervention” (Kompatsiaris, 2017, p. 2).

In addition, the very fact that the Biennale, by placing contemporary artworks in heritage locations, initiates a “temporal dialogue,” in which the patina of time (characteristic of the heritage sites in question) sets itself against the “nowness” of the art, emphasising each other in the process “despite the fact that the experience is a contemporaneous unfolding of an artwork, heritage and viewer relationship” (Cass et al., 2020, p. 3).

Furthermore, over the past decades, the artistic programming of the Venice Biennale has been undergoing a process of challenging “the symbolic and historical connotations of national pavilions” (Ricci, 2020, p. 9). The Biennale had established itself as a world-famous stage on which countries can testify to their national identity and reinforce their constructs, an endeavour to which governments are willing to commit—via substantial expenditures—since participation in the Venice Biennale is very likely to increase a nation's international profile and highlight the quality of its visual arts sector (Johanson et al., 2022). As much as this national identity is a construct in which cultural heritage also plays a key role (Graham et al., 2016), the recent process of challenging these symbolisms could be likened to the past decades' shift in heritage studies from perceiving cultural heritage solely through the lens of the Authorized Heritage Discourse, with an excessive focus on materiality, to a more fluid approach of heritage as a

process, whose meanings are constantly changing. These shifts that challenge the status quo have been explored by scholars such as Laurajane Smith, for whom cultural heritage manifests itself as “a multilayered performance that embodies acts of remembrance and commemoration while negotiating and constructing a sense of place, belonging and understanding in the present” (2006, p. 3), or Rodney Harrison, who argued that heritage is a “material-discursive process in which past and future arise out of dialogue and encounter between multiple embodied subjects in (and with) the present” (2015, p. 27). Considering the link between heritage and the building of national identity, the increasing fluid and open approach to heritage processes also leads to questioning the dynamics of national identity.

The focus on meaning also appears in its relation to the concept of “place,”³ which in turn can be linked to the effects of exposure to art, as the context and environment of such an event are, according to White and Hebe (2010), one of the three main enablers⁴ for an artistic experience. The spatial, temporal and material conditions that are strongly linked to experiencing art are very much similar to the experiences in and with heritage (Boetzkes, 2009).

For Jacek Purchla, “heritage is people: its creators, interpreters, and users,” arguing that this conceptual approach holds the key to the discussion on the dynamics behind creating and reinterpreting heritage (2022, p. 1). For Brian Graham (2002), meanings are the focal point of heritage, not its material character; and heritage is used as a means of communication, a way to transmit values and ideas, as well as multi-layered knowledge encompassing tangible, intangible, and virtual aspects. This perspective echoes processes that occur when individuals are in contact with art, as art also comes from a deeply subjective experience and lends itself to constant interpretations and various uses, from the more practical ones to using art for mental well-being (Zbranca et al., 2022). In addition to this, art can also be used to generate experience-based knowledge (*a posteriori* knowledge), by acknowledging the individual’s definitional perspectives of art and its impact (White and Hede, 2010).

When taking this into consideration, one can see the lines between art and heritage becoming quite blurred, as a meaning- and process-based concept of heritage would also include art. In the case of the Venice Biennale though, the

3 This be traced to human geographers such as Yi-Fu Tuan, for whom space is gradually turning into place as it is acquiring “definition and meaning” (1977, p. 136).

4 The two scholars consider an enabler to be “a factor that facilitates the occurrence of impact”; the other two enablers, according to them, are opportunity (the access, time and cost related to an artistic experience) and resonance (personal identification, community value); their analysis identified seven types of impacts of art, related to perception, sensation, well-being, transmission, innovation, vision, and connection (White and Hebe, 2010, p. 27).

topic is contemporary art, which falls outside pre-defined historical categories and is yet to undergo the traditional processes that would make it heritage (value-based evaluation, reaching a consensus on said values, acknowledging the experiences and history behind a certain object or phenomena (Konsa, 2013)). Yet by the very fact that experiencing contemporary art has to do with cultural memory, and experiencing heritage also includes elements of creativity, both art and heritage appear intertwined.

Contemporary art and heritage practices and policies

Through the very topics that the 2022 edition addressed, the Biennale also tried to harness the power of contemporary art as a “call to action” for institutional change (Cass et al., 2020). For example, the US Pavilion (featuring works by Simone Leigh—the first black woman to represent the US at the event—under the title *Sovereignty*) approached disparate histories and narratives, including those related to ritual performances by the Baga of Guinea, early Black American material culture from the Edgefield District in South Carolina, and the 1931 Paris Colonial Exposition, with interventions that, though new hybridities, aimed to fill gaps in the historical record (La Biennale di Venezia, 2022).

One of the strongest national presences at the 2022 edition, the Nordic countries (Norway, Sweden, and Finland) showcased their works in the reimagined Sámi Pavilion, which marked a shift from the organisation by individual country traditional for the Biennale, bringing into discussion trans-border identities and cultural phenomena (Fig. 3). These works in various media aimed at highlighting the imbalance of colonial power relations across Scandinavia and the Kola Peninsula, where the Sámi people were forced to renounce the bonds of kinship along with key elements of their lives—the land and the water. The Pavilion also came forward with proposals for healing, repairing, and reviving Sámi worldviews today (La Biennale di Venezia, 2022). It did so by bringing together the creative practices and worldviews of three Sámi artists and land guardians, namely Pauliina Feodoroff, Máret Ánne Sara, and Anders Sunna, whose work inside the Pavilion comprised three main pillars: the spiritual perspectives of the Sámi, the holistic approach of Sámi knowledge and learning processes, and the transgenerational dynamics (Office for Contemporary Art Norway, 2022). The Sámi Pavilion thus perfectly captured how indigenous practices and historical aspects—elements of cultural heritage—had been re-contextualised, given new meanings, and set themselves up for a dialogue with a broad audience through the artistic works of Feodoroff, Sara, and Sunna.



Figure 2.
Sámi Pavilion, 20
November 2022.
Photo source:
author's personal
archive.

Another example is the Polish Pavilion (Fig. 3) which showcased a textile installation by Małgorzata Mirga-Tas (*Re-enchanting the World*). The work drew inspiration from the frescoes found at Palazzo Schifanoia in Ferrara to depict various aspects of Roma culture⁵; one Saturday in mid-November, almost 3,000 people passed through the installation during the opening hours in Giardini, with waiting times of up to one hour in the late afternoon (based on my own observations).



Figure 3.
*Re-enchanting
the World* by
Małgorzata
Mirga-Tas,
Polish Pavilion,
9 November 2022.
Photo source:
author's personal
archive.

⁵ The installation in the Polish Pavilion consists of twelve large-format textiles, each of them associated to a certain month of the year; the upper band of the textile piece reinterprets the story of the Roma's mythical journey to Europe, the middle band is focused on Roma herstories, while the lower band highlights aspects of everyday life in the artist's hometown and other Roma settlements. The frescoes at Ferrara's Palazzo Schifanoia have a similar structure, and, in addition, include elements such as zodiac signs and cyclicity, which Małgorzata Mirga-Tas reinterpreted and transposed into her work (Mirga-Tas, 2022).

When putting all of the above into the broader perspective, it can be argued that a key concept emerges as a kind of common agent of art and heritage: cultural memory. With transience and high degree of selectivity as main characteristics, cultural memory lends itself to being used by the dominant ideologies in given geo-political contexts (Assmann, 2006, 2011; Erll, 2011; Khrebtan-Hörhager, 2016, 2017; Winter, 2006). Since different nations (represented by the pavilions and the artworks displayed within, in the case of the Venice Biennale) engage in acts of remembrance, re-living, and resisting history differently, and culture is also conceptualised in a wide range of ways, it is important to carefully observe the process of curation—what is kept to be remembered, what is discarded to be forgotten. This can also be seen as a form of meaning-making, a crucial component in art-making (Setai et al., 2019), just like this process is also an integral part of heritage (Smith, 2006). Because constructing “collages of memory” has a direct effect on national agendas, a close inspection of the processes involved in curating the associated cultural memory proves to be essential for understanding art as a critical pedagogy (Khrebtan-Hörhager, 2019).

Heritage and art experiences

The call-to-action element is further highlighted by the fact that both heritage and contemporary art are being increasingly recognised as processes, with both arguably demanding an active engagement from the audiences (Black and Farley, 2020). In addition to these features, heritage and art share both a visual and a material culture, where the objects echo issues of history, social contexts, or identity, just to name a few; and both art and heritage draw their existence from particular constructions of historical time/place, while eventually gaining a performative character (Staiff, 2015).

An emphasis is now being placed on individual experiences, where an audience engages with heritage within a process of gaining or “consuming” cultural and social capital and audiences shift from being passive to being active (Carroll La, 2011). These aspects were very easy to observe during the Venice Biennale, an environment imbued with art (also heritage-inspired in numerous instances), as visitors were often sharing their impressions with the cultural mediators in charge of the national pavilions, were entering or leaving a pavilion depending on their emotional reaction to the artwork within, they were capturing it with their phones or cameras or sharing their impressions on social media.

The Romanian Pavilion, featuring Adina Pintilie’s *You Are Another Me—A Cathedral of the Body* (Fig. 4), was an ideal case study for showcasing the multitude of different artistic experiences. Envisioned as “a space of togetherness, beyond borders and binaries,” the work is set against “growing polarities between people

and between belief systems” (La Biennale di Venezia, 2022). Pintilie, together with curators Viktor Neuman and Cosmin Costinaş, aimed at reinterpreting the Romanian Pavilion—a space already full of history and meaning—and at transforming it “into a contemporary *cathedral* that celebrates the body and human connections beyond any preconceptions” (E-flux, 2022).



Figure 4. Scene from *You Are Another Me—A Cathedral of the Body* by Adina Pintilie, Romanian Pavilion, 20 November 2022.
Photo source: author's personal archive.

People would regularly queue to visit the Romanian Pavilion, peaking at around 150 people who waited to enter and see the work, but due to its rather challenging themes (body image, disability, intimacy), it often triggered very strong and opposing reactions: several visitors who stayed throughout the whole 45-minute run of the cinematic installation claimed it was “one of the best works ever seen at the Biennale,” while other visitors exited the installation after a mere two minutes, utterly disgusted (my own data gathered in November 2022). One visitor claimed that the artist, Adina Pintilie, “does not know how to tell a story”—a remark contradicted by the artist’s achievement of winning the 2018 Golden Bear at the Berlinale Film Festival for *Touch Me Not*. This only shows the remarkable array of reactions that a work of art can trigger, and therefore the multitude of coexisting perspectives—in sync with the different heritage narratives which can unfold in relation to any given heritage site or object.

Venice Biennale: From the symbolic capital of historic Venice to innovation for the future

All of these aforementioned processes necessarily occur at the crossroads between the past and the present, with a glimpse to the future, as the Biennale seeks to upkeep its over one-hundred-year-old legacy as the world's largest art exhibition, taking place every two years uninterrupted, except during the Second World War and the COVID-19 pandemic, while addressing heavy contemporary topics to forge sets of tools that could enable a better understanding of the world. The 2022 edition sought to extend the achievement of "carbon neutrality" certification (in line with the Biennale's increasing interest in environmental topics), obtained in 2021 for the 78th Venice International Film Festival; it featured predominantly female artists—the Central Pavilion in Giardini did not include any male artists, and out of the 217 artists who exhibited at the event, around 90 percent identify as women or gender nonconforming, a strong contrast to the event's track record of having approximately 30 percent of its contributions created by female artists (Burleigh, 2022); and last but not least, it was strongly anchored in pressing social issues related to the environment, technology, and marginalised communities. As Biennale 2022 curator Cecilia Alemani wrote in her statement:

The pressure of technology, the heightening of social tensions, the outbreak of the pandemic, and the looming threat of environmental disaster remind us every day that as mortal bodies, we are neither invincible nor self-sufficient, but rather part of a symbiotic web of interdependencies that bind us to each other, to other species, and to the planet as a whole. (2022)

When looking at the Venice Biennale, I argue that the event itself articulates as a form of cultural heritage due to its hybrid character, anchored in tradition, interpreting the present, and looking to stay relevant for the future. Cultural heritage in itself is seen to be "historically constructed as a hybrid social product" (Martí, 2006, p. 92). Furthermore, according to Hernandez i Martí, when culture becomes a form of patrimony it mixes elements rescued from the past with others generated in the present in order to transmit them into the future to the coming generations. It is this eclecticism at the intersection of past, present and future that renders heritage hybrid, "where dead and living forms of culture, tradition and modernity, amnesia and anamnesis, enchantment and disenchantment, order and criticism are fused" (Martí, 2006, p. 101).

The tradition of the new: innovation becoming heritage

Adding to this discussion, there is Pierre Nora's concept of *lieux de mémoire*, as a form of both reflection and production anchored in the dominant cultural trends of a certain moment in time. Nora argued that among various *lieux de mémoire*, museums have proven excellent media for creating and transmitting memories and messages, rewriting histories, and negotiating existing and emerging interculturalities (1989).

Considering Nora's conceptualisation, I argue that the institution of the Venice Biennale has managed to create *lieux de mémoire* within the spaces of Giardini and Arsenale, the result of overlapped memories of the past editions, the constant reinterpretation of the physical spaces (mainly the national pavilions, but also the connecting alleys and other elements of the two main venues), and the Biennale's offering itself as a space for constructing, deconstructing, and reconstructing meanings among different cultures, and reinterpreting, time and time again, what actually defines a nation in terms of its culture. Therefore, the constant flow of new ideas within the event enables processes of heritagisation.

Conclusion

Since, according to the literature on which this paper is based, there is much room for researching both the relationship between art and cultural heritage (Cass et al., 2020) and the dynamic between heritage and mega-events (Jones and Ponzini, 2018), one can argue that it is high time that these interlinked topics should be explored as part of a holistic approach.

This can be of much help for designing integrated programmes and public policies to serve both the users who experience the event itself, but also the artists and staff involved in the Biennale, while also taking into consideration the actual residents of Venice, who are the most impacted by the city's attractiveness due to both its architectural heritage and the Biennale. This can also contribute to the current dominant discourse in the impact of art research aiming to develop a framework of research using both conceptual and empirical methods, which could then be of use in cultural policy, arts management, and academia—therefore serving a much wider range of stakeholders than the previous dominant discourses centred on empirical research or on critique, the uses of which were limited to either cultural policy or academia (White and Hede, 2010). The need to inquire further into the intersection of art and heritage is also backed by Cass, Park, and Powell who draw special attention to the lack of academic publications on the implications of these two “cohabiting” disciplines (2020). It has also been argued that the shift from passive transfer to active production of knowledge in

both art and heritage can take these two fields further by facilitating new possible ways of engagement with both heritage and art (Black and Farley, 2020).

Considering the context, aims, and topics of the Venice Biennale, the event itself can be considered a form of cultural heritage. Not only does it continue a legacy of over a century, but it also subjects itself to transformations in sync with contemporary social issues, thus undergoing constant reinterpretation. Furthermore, its structure is based on the representations of nations, with heritage being an important aspect at play here (especially for the Western world). In the end, the Venice Biennale does not necessarily need to provide definitive solutions to the very topics that it addresses. How could it anyway, given the sheer scale of the event? But maybe it does not even have to. As an ever-evolving process, whose angles change depending on the moment in time, a context, and/or a viewer, the Biennale can be considered a grand arena of meaning-making and reinterpretation, in which today's art becomes tomorrow's heritage, and today's heritage is fuel for tomorrow's art—in a perpetual dynamic.

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