

INTERVENTION

Minor Waterways: Politics and Water at the 61st Venice Art Biennale 2026

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The Venice Art Biennale is nothing if not controversial. This year's controversies, however, risk overtaking the art – and this is only partly because of the magnitude of the controversies. In this text, while taking into account the controversies, I offer a tracing of a network of 'waterways', where politics and water merge. Of course, the water link ('Venice therefore water') has always been present in previous Biennale, but has truly exploded this year. I set therefore the geopolitical scene of the Biennale in relation to both art and protests, and move onto a description of the most interesting aquatic emergences for my purposes of thinking geopolitically about an aquatic anthropocene.

Keywords: Venice; Biennale; Art; Water; Politics

Navigating

The Venice Art Biennale is nothing if not controversial. This year's controversies, however, risk overtaking the art—and this is only partly because of the magnitude of the controversies. The art shown on this year's Biennale is, sadly, and in awareness of the generalisation this entails, forgettable. The memorable exceptions appear in scattered spots, both within and outside the official boundaries of the Biennale, and constitute a sort of network of complicity, resistance and imagination.

What I am hoping to offer here is a tracing of this network that, for reasons of simplicity and personal interest, I limit to one elemental presence: that of water. The water link ('Venice therefore water') has always been present in previous Biennale, but has truly exploded this year, literally flooding the Biennale with other waters.¹

In what follows, I set the geopolitical scene of the Biennale, in relation to both art and protests, and move onto a description of the most interesting aquatic emergences for my purposes of thinking geopolitically about an aquatic Anthropocene. This means that even in terms of water features, I had to leave many un-commented. But I hope that the ones included here are sufficient for a navigation along the art waterways of the Venice Biennale.

Let It Wash Over You

When the opening of an international art show, like the Venice Biennale, is taking place amidst exceptional political issues affecting the globe, one can reasonably expect spectacular and intense expressions of political struggle

surrounding both the opening and the art presented in the show. True enough, the opening was animated by unprecedented expressions of dissent. The International Jury judging the best pavilions resigned *en masse* only a few days before the opening because of the inclusion of national governments for whom cases were pending before the International Court of Justice.² The moment this piece of news hit the social media sphere was vintage Netflix college-drama; I was at the opening of Sara Bonaventura and Lukas Taido's *Water Dream Memory* exhibition (more on which below) when most attendants were distracted almost simultaneously by their phones beeping the news in WhatsApp groups and *e-flux* notifications. Pussy Riot guerilla groups sprouted in front of the Russian pavilion (**Figures 1 and 2**) and the main Biennale offices in San





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Marco. Packed protests against the Israeli pavilion, with the support of Biennale and pavilion personnel on strike, ended up in violent clashes with the Italian riot police. Several other instances of protest (whose actions sadly did not seem to align, despite the fact that they all talked about resisting the aggressor) scattered around the city reminding everyone of the intense political nature of both the Biennale and art in general.

And yet, in the Giardini and Arsenale, as well as in most national pavilions around the city, an imperious, almost apolitical quietude was feigned. One wonders whether it was because the curators and artists (or indeed the selecting governmental committees) took too literally or too erroneously the tragically deceased original curator's Koyo Kouoh theme '*In Minor Keys*' to mean ignoring, distracting, returning to theory or grand art structures—anything but getting embroiled in the current global geopolitical mess. But even a cursory glance on her struggles and mandate she left behind is enough to understand that *Minor Keys* is a call to constant and firm negotiation, a struggle of unequal bodies that create minor jurisprudences in order to counteract the oppressive machine. Granted, it is about moving away from the horror of violence and finding minor spaces of collaboration and knowledge. But these places are where political thought and praxis are organised. It is the backbone of political position-taking. And art has a great responsibility in offering precisely that.

Yet, this message was lost in the quietude: the US pavilion, for example, has already become infamous as the most eerie and unvisited US pavilion of all Biennales—not so much on account of Alma Allen's smooth sculptures but precisely because of the perceived political blindness by one of the most controversial governments currently. It would seem that distraction was the name of this art game: the Israeli pavilion was announcing its irrelevance (one would think *malgré soi*) in its very title, *Rose of Nothingness*, where a flat pool of water was animated by multiple concentric ripples after some Kabbalah references

about circularity of time and healing. Looking at the work, which otherwise could indeed offer a moment of peace in this more than usual hectic Biennale, brought to mind last year's Israeli prohibition banning Gazans from approaching the sea for any purpose (including fishing, swimming, diving), at the height of the Mediterranean summer. Likewise, the Russian pavilion that opened only for the few days of the pre-opening (the press and art professionals) was a happy-clappy celebration of some updated Grand Russia motherland idea with songs and flowers and even free-to-take second-hand clothes, thus the curators could be said to be doing their bit to combat fast fashion issues while ignoring the bombing of civilians in Ukraine. Pre-emptively, the pavilion was described as non-political, true art and therefore timeless.³

It is indeed a delicate question, what to present in a national pavilion whose politics are being globally criticised. But attempted (and failed) distraction only aggravates a fragile geopolitical and divided ecosystem. No wonder that *NO ARTWASHING* was the most prominent slogan of the protests.

Perhaps for different reasons, the inoffensiveness continues in the curated part of both Giardini and Arsenale, with the art on offer crammed, disjointed and mostly all too pleasant. Whatever discoveries and potentially significant moments might have been, were lost in once again a misinterpretation of the main theme by a team of curators who inherited both the theme and the unenviable responsibility of satisfying a rather formidable superego (the revered Koyo) whispering in their ears what not to do.

The Spectacle of Violence

The above is perhaps one of the reasons why the crowds for the *Austrian pavilion's Seaworld Venice* lined up for 3.5 hours or longer to get a glimpse of the performances. And for the ones who never made it inside the actual pavilion, the outside offered a taste of precisely the kind of spectacularised violence we are now used to, even perhaps addicted to. For when a president of the USA says that by midnight tonight an entire civilisation will die, what else could one do but be glued to one's phone, whatever the time zone, to watch in gleeful horror what this threat amounts to. And what can possibly complement this very real video game more than Florentina Holzinger's extremely moving and brutal spectacle of chiming the hours every hour on the hour—except that the artist was taking the place of the bell clapper and, in a posture of utter abandon that evoked images of dehumanised victims or dead molluscs, she was being hurled from side to side, producing with her hips the kind of sound Venice is replete of (**Figure Video 3**). This mnemonic exercise of enduring Christian and Empire values is intimately connected to water. As the curator Swantje-Almes says,

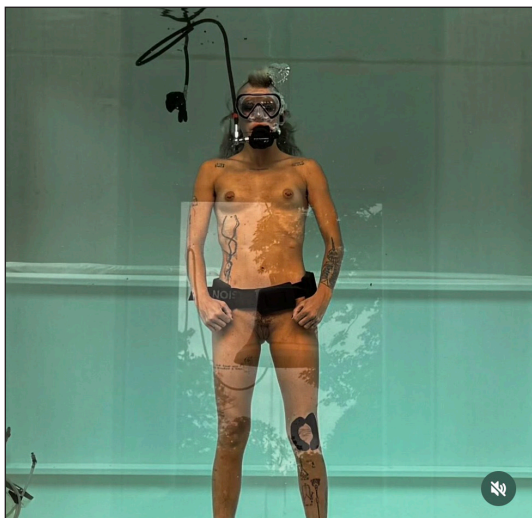
'Water is a highly ambivalent element. It is a vital resource, a controlled commodity, a threat, a symbol of transformation and, of course, runs through our bodies in endless cycles. ... Venice is a city suspended in beauty and collapse, where mass-tourism and ecological precarity collide. It is particularly threatened by the climate crisis and flooding. We are complicit in contributing to the

rising sea levels, as are the visitors to the Biennale. Water is also a natural mirror. In *Seaworld Venice*, Florentina paints an apocalyptic scenario: What if life on land as we know it, is no longer possible?⁴



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The title is a nod to a world (and not just Venice) that is becoming a theme park flooded by excrement. The most striking exhibit consists of two portaloos that invite guests to deposit their urine, which is then filtered and poured into a large watertank containing a performer submerged for four or even eight hours at a time (Figure 4).



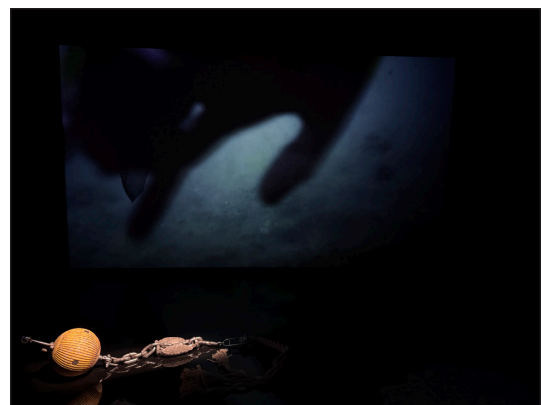
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The violence continues, but in a less explicit form at the *Romanian Pavilion Black Seas*. Although there is no vertical glass to show us our excrement that floods the

planet, the anthropocenic responsibility comes through: the Black Sea is used as the perfect geopolitical case study for the horrors of military extractivism. The composition of the sea as a stratified body, with the anoxic depths below clearly differentiated from the surface, means that decomposition slows down and, as the statement of the pavilion reads, 'the sea becomes an archive'. The artists Benera and Estefán created a multimedia work that brings the darker elements of the sea to the surface (Figures 5 and 6). The space is raging, following the constant turbulence of the waters which, although a closed-off water body, are always in motion. In chunks of the Black Sea sedimentation encased in boxes, the artists trace geological movements, vanished empires and shadows of previous military uses, showing that waters are always palimpsestic, and that the damage is by now so deep as to make it practically irreversible.



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The same type of violent enclosure appears in *Hong Kong in Venice* pavilion, where Angel Hui hangs from the ceiling a multitude of embroidered goldfish enclosed in plastic water bags (Figure 7), ready for sale, an item

of immediate consumption often seen in Hong Kong markets. Those little parcels of packaged death time, the precarity of the fish, the asphyxiating closure of the plastic: it all contributes to a sense of end of time, indeed a much shorter human time that ticks differently to that of the planet's, reminding us of our fleetingness. Compare this to the temporality of *Sky Pool*, a video installation by Jaspas Joseph-Lester at *Personal Structures* at Palazzo Bembo: the video focuses on a fairly recent pool built between two luxury apartment buildings in London, wholly transparent, where swimmers can be seen from below swimming in suspended water, as if in the middle of the sky (**Figure 8**). The video is commenting on the open temporality of capitalism, where even the horizon is obtainable as a property, and where water, that most fluid of fluids, can be boxed in a glass container and placed in a theological position for all to admire and envy.

inviting passersby to mirror their lives on the ice slab's fleeting duration. In a similar vein, Sara Bonaventura's *Thermal Alchemy* at *Water Dream Memory* double show with Lukas Taido, part of the Global Network of Water Museums, links deep time with our human geological ancestry through a video that moves seamlessly from the human to the nonhuman to the divine, shot in the thermal waters of the Euganean Hills (**Figure 10**). A much more classical, eternal time featured in *Julian Charriere's* solo show in conversation with Canova at Museo Correr, where the immovability of the classical marble statues was contrasted with videos reminiscent of deep oceans and the Big Bang. In one of the rooms, two statues are surrounded by a trembling mirror surface covering the room like a wallpaper, making it a place of intense aquatic immersion (**Figure 11**).



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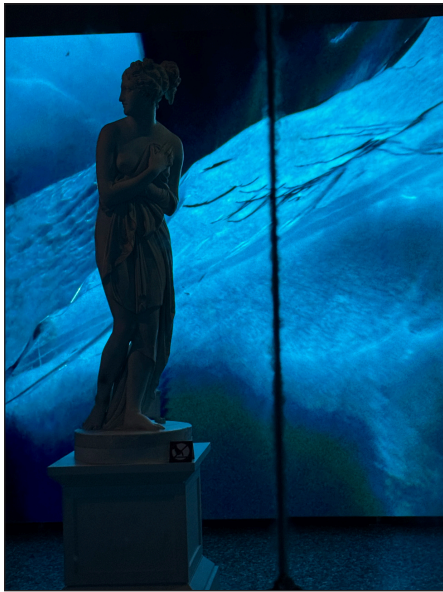
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The Time of the Waters

Water breeds both eternity and ephemerality, often in exactly the same form. *Nauru Pavilion* installed an ice slab on the first, very wet and rainy day of the Biennale pre-opening, right on the sea promenade (**Figure 9**), this was later attempted to be slashed to pieces by artist Stefano Cagol (but the ice withheld strongly). The ice glistened with the falling rain, revealing its crystal structure,



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There were a few moments like this in this year's Biennale, where one was invited to stand and feel the passing of time, being almost forced to face one's reflection and (if one could skip the selfie temptation) contemplate one's role in this brief eternity. What is fascinating to me is that most of these moments were centred around a body of water, whether as actual or metaphorical reflection. The *Canadian Pavilion*, for example, was taken over by a reflective body of water in which lilies from Kew Gardens were placed in a temporality of surviving and even multiplying (over the months of the Biennale, it is expected to grow into a sizeable water-lily colony). Abbas Akhavan's *Entre Chien et Loup* is a show dedicated to the qualities of water. As he says, 'over the years I have used water for different reasons. It can suggest a narrative, a way to animate or halt something. Its flow has a kind of visual charm—it can be a very effective viewing device, a means to arbitrarily connect or highlight materials and moments' (Akhavam 2026, 86) (Figure 12).



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The connection in this case is an anthropocenic fragility: although humans are the worst enemies of themselves, and destruction is afoot everywhere, in those moments of intense artificiality, like a Biennale pavilion, a cultivation of an anti-catastrophe, indeed a water-lily shaped hope emerges that something might be maintained, even despite us. Although, as Maja Malou Lyse in *Things to Come* for the *Danish Pavilion* shows, humanity's future survival is not only possible but also entirely improvable, with sperm banks no longer hosting human sperm but artificial entities that do the job. A strange liquidity is afoot, one that replaces the biological and renders it obsolete.

Politics of Affect

In the *Philippines Pavilion*, Jon Cuyson recreates an affective universe of longing and separation that speaks to immigration woes and nostalgia, all distilled in the water of the ocean separating the Philippines from the world. The affect here is more than human: Cuyson works with the function of mussels, which filter the water and survive as a collective memory by carrying sediment from forgotten passages. There is a politics of memory afoot, one that fires the protests outside and claims a validity of collective memory against artwashing (Figure 13).



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In those internal moments of affective immersion, politics emerge as both local and planetary. The *Wales in Venice Pavilion's* *Sownd* points to the invisible but omnipresent network of wetlands, bridging Venice together with Wales via open wells of welcoming immersion built around practices of stickiness, unsteady ground, mud, and constant negotiation with the bodies in and outside the wetness. The sound accompanying the rooms of the pavilion is an oral archive of collaboration across languages (Welsh and English) and extends beyond the human by involving material and their quality of stickiness: as Manon Awst together with Dylan Huw (2026) say, 'Whatever we make as artists has an impact since there's no beyond for materials – they stick

around, having long-lasting weight and unpredictable consequences for which we are only recently holding ourselves accountable. I've asked myself the question, can sculptural work have intentional rather than incidental stickiness – works firmly rooted, growing out of a particular site, in long-term collaboration with its diverse human and more-than-human communities?' This goes right to the core of Anthropocene and our responsibility as artists and makers, but also of any person that uses and creates material structures: stickiness as accountability, with threads linking to everyone's presence and complicity in the production of anthropogenic layers (Figure 14).



14

Politics of affect are often paradoxical. In one of the best curated group shows in Venice, *Still Joy – From Ukraine into the World*, curators Björn Geldhof and Oleksandra Pogrebnyak manage to bring out the joy in the most ravaged country currently in Europe through a group of artists who worked affectively and politically on all levels, leaving the visitor with that feeling of desperate and slightly manic melancholy joy about the need to survive no matter what. Amongst the various exquisite works, Lesia Vasylenko's work *1534*, placed in one of the courtyards, consists of a large LED screen where an observer with their back to us is looking ahead, while water falls in front of the screen and into a pool. The contrast between the static and the flowing is deeply affective, and the pool on the base serves almost as a depository of sadness (Figure 15). The feeling is complemented by Piotr Armianovski's bittersweet video essay *Me and Mariupol*, where the need to return to a Mariupol that no longer exists is rounded out by the invitation of an open sea to carry on living or to swim under the waves and vanish (Figure 16).



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16

The Real Joy Is Under Water

I have kept for last one of the most riotously good shows in the Biennale this year. The *Polish Pavilion's Liquid Tongues* by Bogna Burska and Daniel Kotowski has two giant screens showing underwater scenes from a swimming pool session. In the pool, several women and one man, all of whom are deaf, communicate underwater with their whole body, gestures, faces, even, as one of the artists told me, managing to use the open mouth part of the deaf language without swallowing water.

This is overlaid by a stupendously addictive song with some of the most ambiguous and fun poetry texts of the Biennale (some random verses: ‘she came on the back of the whale/today the sperm whales spoke to me/rain in the water/sing like me- you’re underwater/here only the whales sing/here people sing with their hands/look like me-you’re underwater’). The text is intense and repetitive, embodying the frustration of communication. The work is a constant oscillation between forms: different species (humans, whales), languages (English, deaf), elements (water, air) and so on. And everybody leaks. As H-Dirksen writes in the pavilion’s catalogue, ‘to sign is more than human’ (Bauman 2026, 146–157) (**Figure 17**).



17

Liquid Tongues is all about the joy of keeping on fighting, communicating and floating. It is a hymn to underwater joy, and a wish for a planetary hug. And it leads me softly to the last work of this year’s Biennale I would like to focus on: Neville Gabie’s *Experiments in Black and White XXXV*, shown in perhaps one of the best-kept secrets of art in Venice, the *Danielle Arnaud Gallery Venice*. The video is a quick series of photographic captures of the artist carrying a 30L plastic water container all around Venice. The struggle is evident, and so is the ‘unworking’, as Maurice Blanchot put it, of the whole effort. The sequence ends with his emptying the water into a canal. There is an existential toil here, and an endurance belied by the fast pace of the sequence. But beyond all, it shows a moment of responsibility: to carry the water that we are. To become this water ourselves via the arduous process of negotiating space, other bodies, movement itself. The politics of the Biennale, indeed its aquatic politics, can be distilled in this one picture where Gabie visibly exhausted, leans against a Venetian lamppost, water tank in hand, waiting for the release of the weight but not giving up, not abandoning it, persevering and resisting. Gabie, along with Pussy Riot, the pro-Palestine protests, and the world that looked at protests and understood their need even when they did not necessarily understand the politics; they all became water, just like Bruce Lee wanted the Hong Kong protesters to become: ‘Be formless, shapeless, like water. Now you put water into a cup, it becomes the cup...Be water, my friend’ (Kwong 2020) (**Figure 18**).



18 (all photographs by author)

Notes

- ¹ I interpret water quite narrowly here, therefore leaving out several aquatic-by-extension shows, such as the extraordinary breathy space of *Elegy* by Gabrielle Goliath (banned from the South African Pavilion for being too controversial), who instead occupied the deconsecrated church of San Antonin with the most breathy choir of one drone-tone sung by women, trans and nonbinary people. I also leave out some notable aquatic presences such as Kazakhstan’s group show *The Aural Sea*, which—like Argentina’s solo show by Matías Duville—used salt as a way of connecting to the aquatic; or indeed Martínez-Vega’s *Amazonien* solo installation on sacral amazon water; or Ocean Space and its current exhibitions, as always about water.
- ² <https://www.e-flux.com/notes/6783485/statement-of-intention-by-the-international-jury-of-the-61st-international-art-exhibition-in-minor-keys-of-la-biennale-di-venezia>; <https://www.e-flux.com/notes/6783487/statement-of-resignation>; subsequently, many national pavilions have withdrawn from being considered for the prize.
- ³ <https://www.dw.com/ru/rf-vernetsa-na-biennale-venecii-iskusstvo-vne-politiki/a-76280262>.
- ⁴ <https://whitewall.art/art/nora-swantje-almes-curator-of-the-austrian-pavilion-at-the-venice-biennale-2026/>.

Competing Interests

The author has no competing interests to declare.

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