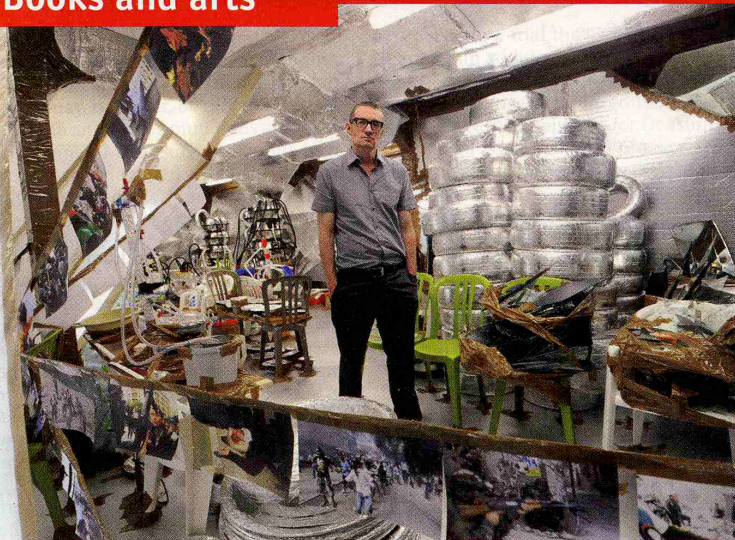


# GLADSTONE GALLERY

"Art as a Political Game," *The Economist*, June 11-17, 2011



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**The Venice Biennale**

## Art as a political game

VENICE

**Competition between artists at the world's biggest art event has never been more fierce. But what happens in the Biennale's national pavilions?**

EVER since the Venice Biennale was launched in 1895, individual countries have offered their artists a showcase in national pavilions. Some are financed through their culture ministries, such as Italy's, others, like Britain's, through the ministry of foreign affairs. The Ukraine pavilion is paid for by a private collector, Poland's via multiple sources. For 55 years there were fewer than 20 entrants, but in 1950 the number began to grow. This year, despite last-minute cancellations from Bahrain and Lebanon, there are 89 national pavilions, the highest number ever and up from 77 two years ago, proof of the global spread of contemporary art.

The scale of the Venice Biennale means that artists, cultural institutions and individual countries all vie, not just for attention, but for international recognition. The national pavilions take many forms, yet only a few make any real impact.

The fairground atmosphere puts a premium on art as a memorable experience rather than as a precious object. Pavilions that offer a convincing conceptual environment are the most celebrated. A number of veteran exhibitors have chosen this route, including Germany, which this year won the coveted Golden Lion award, the fair's highest honour. But the most popular among artists is the Swiss pavilion. Thomas Hirschhorn's "Crystal of Resistance" (pictured above) creates an idiosyncratic universe of ready-made stuff. Anarchic

and politicised rather than orderly and neutral, the pavilion defies Swiss stereotypes. Mr Hirschhorn is an independent spirit who refuses to pander to political authority, fashion or the art market. His installation is filled with broken glass, silver foil, cardboard, Q-tips, plastic chairs, old mobile phones and colour printouts of low-resolution war photos, all held together by brown duct tape, a recognisable Hirschhorn motif. It is the antithesis of a boutique displaying luxury goods.

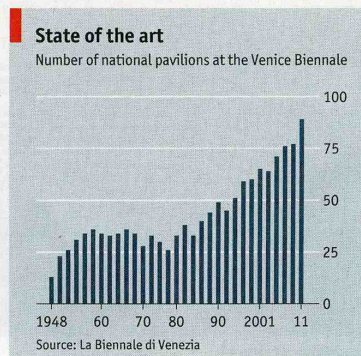
An unexpected political statement is another way to make your mark in Venice. Nowhere has this been done more effectively than in the Polish pavilion which has been given over to Yael Bartana, an Israeli video artist. The pavilion presents a

trilogy of films about the Jewish Renaissance Movement, a political group founded by the artist that calls for the return of Jews to eastern Europe. Poland's embrace of Ms Bartana's ingenuity is regarded as a sign of graceful nationhood and highly appreciated by art-world cognoscenti.

By contrast, predictable political gestures invariably come across as grandiose or hollow. Outside the American pavilion, Allora & Calzadilla, a young artistic duo who live in Puerto Rico, have installed "Track and Field". An Olympic athlete activates a treadmill mounted on an overturned military tank. The message that war goes nowhere is as dreary as the racket generated by the work when it is moving. More successful is the sculpture that the artists have installed inside the pavilion. "Algorithm" is both a pipe organ and a fully functioning ATM machine. When art lovers withdraw euros from the work, they find themselves engulfed by booming hymn-like chords.

Given the ongoing tumult in the Arab world, Saudi Arabia's pavilion has elicited comment, not least because it was given over to two sisters who forgo the veil when they travel abroad. Shadia and Raja Alem, an artist and a writer, have installed a large-scale sculpture entitled "The Black Arch". The work makes reference to Mecca, but it is not clear whether they see their art as subordinate to religion or vaguely in competition with it.

Newcomers sometimes think that their pavilion should represent their nation as if their artists were civil servants employed by the tourist office. The Azerbaijani offering suffered this fate. Aidan Salakhova, an Azeri artist based in Moscow, displayed two sculptures: "Waiting Bride", which shows a woman covered in a black veil, and "Black Stone of Mecca", a marble sculpture that looks like a giant vagina. ▶▶



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▶ Ilham Aliyev, the Azeri president, however, took umbrage at her work. The sculptures have been shrouded in white sheets to the amusement of many visitors, and are soon to be removed.

Excuses can be made for art-world neophytes, but few understand why this year's Italian pavilion looks like an amateur art bazaar in a suburban mall. Curated by Vittorio Sgarbi, an art historian better known as a pompous television personality, it is entitled "Art is not Cosa Nostra". If the national pavilions often reveal a country's attitude to art—as an autonomous creative activity, a sign of innovation, or even a public relations or propaganda tool—visitors to the grandmother of all biennials will be astonished that Italians appear to think contemporary art is like the thoughtless knock-offs found in cheap shopping arcades. ■