

61st Venice Biennale, Pavilions and Satellites

Quinn Latimer



View of Chiara Camoni's "Con te con tutto" in the Pavilion of Italy at the 61st Venice Biennale, 2026. Image courtesy of La Biennale di Venezia. Photo by Marco Zorzanello.

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61st Venice Biennale, Venice

It has been said, still, I'll say it again, that the art on view at the Venice Biennale seemed less interesting, less important, than the storied lives of all those who made it, curated it, practiced it, protested it, viewed it, voiced it, even funded it, darkly or lightly, as it were. Life, teeming, mourned, or gone, actively being destroyed or defended, was the main thing. A central exhibition in the making of which the curator died; a German Pavilion that lost one of its artists; years now of the genocide in Gaza, unabated and unabashed, of renewed imperialist violence, in all its valences; an opening of pavilions quickly shut in symbolic protest, and of a landscape redolent of empire and nation-states collapsing and digging in simultaneously, as the Holy See offered sound retreats: all acted together to shift the emphasis from aesthetic valuation to simple (never so simple) sensorial and relational experience. And to those gatherings of heightened relation—all ardor and alienation, connection and hierarchy, perverse and occasionally liberatory gatherings—in which it might be experienced.

This shift signaled another: from an emphasis on the visual and optical to the sonic and aural, the oral and the textual. Amid our surveillance states of murder and profit, this seemed right. Where have our vaunted visual regimes taken us, with their enlightened extractivism, their constant production of images read not as evidence of fact, of some real and carefully

documented truth, but its opposite? Thus the move, again, to a richly grounded opacity, its lunar and shadowy iterations, and to the ear eager for those twilight languages and more ghostly and gnomonic knowledges that step away from revelation in its original apocalyptic meaning and register. *Apokalyptō*, in Greek, being the bringing to light to bear on everything, a drone-like revealing of what was previously unknown, unseen. And so while Koyo Kouoh's "Minor Keys" are possible islands, yes, diasporic archipelagos of rest and resistance, they also seem like, well, keys. Those played and keyed to ghost notes and languages and literatures and voices and instruments that sounded in the margins—narrow as canals or wide as oceans—of the Arsenale and the Giardini. That is, in Venice's other shelters, its churches and glass houses, courtyards and canals, shops and palazzos. Here are some that got to me.

"One day a group of killers slipped into their city. . ." So goes one of the parables in Amar Kanwar's lucid, seismic, wildly affecting film installation, *The Peacock's Graveyard* (2023), at Palazzo Grassi, part of his "Co-travellers" show at the Pinault Collection. Paced by a hypnotically minimal solo piano by the artist's nephew, who plays a jazzy Indian raga on the keys, then pulls the piano's strings and pounds on its body—shades of Julius Eastman—the installation unfolds in a blacked-out room as seven floating screens of images and text appear and disappear, kaleidoscopically. Enigmatic parables and koans in poetically lined subtitles are offered: a writer slits a president's throat only for the president to be reincarnated as a pomegranate; a holy man drinks from a stream, his beard floating as he sips, before being murdered by a landowner; peacocks keep watch over bodied graves. Among these texts, images of flowers, peacocks, rooms, rain, lakes, slip in and out, in strange rhythm against the pool of black. As one screen states, at once elliptically and pointedly, the work is "Dedicated / To your nausea, amnesia, aphasia and / insomnia your trembling fingers and sliding speech . . . To the diamond light of darkness / of visible fear and forgotten pain / To flashes of your lightening rage." I felt it. I remembered the blue-and-green peacocks, like brilliant and alien sentinels, that would jump the walled garden at the academy in Rome where I lived last year. As one screen in his film states, "In the Peacock's Graveyard / the dead are never alone." When I ran into the artist later, Kanwar told me that the peacock is the national symbol of India. I asked if the work had been shown yet in India, for whose slide into supremacy it seemed a clear allegory. "Not yet," Kanwar said, smiling gently. "Soon."

"But the drums are lying, time is irreconcilable," went the text flashing to the beat of a pounding score in a video by Hannah Black that I found in a small, poignant group show called "Counterforms" at A plus A Gallery, around the corner from Palazzo Grassi. Her video exchanged Kanwar's delicate piano ragas for some thrashing and propulsive drums. Yet, like Kanwar, she let pale text on a black screen unfold in a tempo of language as sound and image both, attuned and edited to the exaltation of the metronomically laboring score. In just four minutes, *Jaki Liebezeit During a Power Cut Circa 1970* (2012), Black narrates the power of drumming during a blackout in a kind of advertorial and temporal incantation of capital and desire, class analysis as invocation. The artist has said the work "fuses the economic changes in the organization of capital that happened in the 1970s and a child listening to her parents' records."¹ Yes. Also included in the show is another subtle, remarkable film articulating the rhythms and ghost notes of language, recall, and historical absence: Ufuoma Essi's *Half Memory* (2024), its scanned and grainy Super 8 color images of California—all surveillance poetics at golden hour—set to Toni Morrison's idea of "rememory." For the novelist, these are traumatic memories that, externalized, sit outside the bodies that hold them, imprinting our world: its spaces, its screens, its pages, its streets, its cities, its songs, its objects, its images.

The idea held me. Later, at Marina Xenofontos's Cyprus Pavilion, I wondered if her animatronic, papier-mâché sparrow, twitching and ticking like a metronome from the clock placed in its open belly (*Passer*, 2026), was a rememory, per Morrison. Could the same be said of the wooden ceiling that hovered above me, replicating the ceiling of the Perroquet, a nightclub that once symbolized Cyprus's cosmopolitan and hedonistic postcolonial modernism? Perroquet has sat silent, a ruin, since 1974, in the district of Varosha, cordoned off and abandoned after Turkey's military invasion. Under that recreated ceiling, a recording of chorales and folk songs sung by women from Xenofontos's family, the Ayisilaou sisters, played. The sisters sang during agricultural festivities, their songs come from gramophone records played in *kafenias*, those cafes patronized by the men in their families, then taught to the women at home. Thus the layers of transmission, exclusion, and transformation run deep. Mixed by Panagiotis Mina, the soundtrack is called *You presented the most beautiful. And the most beautiful is the wound on your chest* (2026). The transmission of their voices—vernacular, liturgical, spectral, familiar, feminine, alien, wounded, beautiful—trailed me as I moved to the back of the pavilion, where another sound emanated. A series of copper cylinders sat in an uneven line on the floor, rotating on their axes, producing nothing but their own sound, their own whirring, coppery image. The loop of labor as the loop of memory, or rememory, its obsessive circularity, producing nothing but itself—not nothing, not really.

The Ayisilaou sisters' voices seemed to be answered by another set of singing sisters alongside yet another slim canal. In the Holy See Pavilion, at the Complex of Santa Maria Ausiliatrice, a sonic liturgy by the Benedictine nuns of Eibingen Abbey honored Hildegard of Bingen. Construed as a contemporary scriptorium (a medieval room for copying illuminated manuscripts), the Vatican Pavilion also features Alexander Kluge's last artistic work. A twelve-station installation of A4 pages of gnomonic musings and images, accompanied by seemingly AI-made videos of historical imagery, all displayed on scaffolding like the trashiest, most copious and literary operetta of encyclopedic knowledge I have recently seen, I was seduced by its sensationally impoverished aesthetics. Poor of material, but never of idea.

Kluge died in March at the age of ninety-four. He recently reappeared, in a sense, in Ben Lerner's new novel *Transcription*, which lightly fictionalizes his singular old-world aesthetic.² Together, Lerner and Kluge wrote a book called *The Snows of Venice* in 2018. Moving around Kluge's collation of medieval thought, ecclesiastical knowledge, spiritual imaginaries, and contemporary artistic practice and philosophy, I almost expected snow to begin falling. It didn't. Just rain. An improbable quote by Pope Leo XIV sliced through the pavilion's press materials and my thoughts: "The logic of algorithms tends to repeat what 'works,' but art opens up what is possible. Not everything has to be immediate or predictable."³

The Chicago Pope's observation made me think about another improbable statement from the clergy that I had read recently, and which had moved me, incalculably. A progressive bishop in the US had urged his fellow clergymen to finalize their wills and prepare for what he called "a new era of martyrdom." He had stated: "Now is no longer the time for statements, but for us with our bodies to stand between the powers of this world and the most vulnerable."⁴ Yes. In a time of imperialist autocrats parading as democratically elected leaders of the so-called free world, of genocidal so-called democracies full stop, it feels strange to return to religious leaders for moral guidance. And yet here we are. How strange was it that the Holy See Pavilion, guided by the heart and the ear, unbowed to the eye, and by the irradiating imaginations and ambient intelligence of Hildegard of Bingen and Kluge, was one of the most moving I saw? Not so strange at all.

As both Kluge's poor opera of constellated knowledge and Hildegard of Bingen's mystical visions, musical compositions, and medicinal writings make explicit, art and science, the visible and invisible, the seen and the sounded, are not to be rent apart. The filmed musical at the heart of Maja Malou Lyse's Danish Pavilion underlined this. Porn performers, in a sperm bank, played various instruments with their augmented bodies. The production of images in the shattering trenches of reproduction, its industry and its mystery and its longing, via the medical establishment's various imaginaries, bodied and disembodied both, sounded the pavilion's sleek spaces, giving them some surreptitious voice.

The voices of the various sisters of Venice stayed with me as I moved over the city's bridges and gardens. Not all the voices in Venice sang, though. As poetry once went from song to speech to text, so did the language at the Biennale. There were numerous ecstatic readings in which "the social" went beyond academic cliché and entered lived meaning. A public reading of the *Elegy Reader*, in which artists and thinkers, writers and architects, read poems under a banner featuring a line by Christina Sharpe and Rinaldo Walcott, which went: "Elegy is wound and medicine when mourning itself is under threat." (The *Reader* was organized, in part, by Gabrielle Goliath in collaboration with Ibraaz, after Goliath's South African pavilion was canceled, then staged outside the purview of the state.) A reading on the steps of Yto Barrada's color-soaked French Pavilion, during a tropical downpour, of tributes to and poems by Etel Adnan, from *My Center is Not in the Solar System*, a new book honoring Adnan coedited by Negar Azimi. Michèle Lamy offered a breathtakingly slow and heartrending reading of the first pages of Adnan's *The Arab Apocalypse* (1980), that litany of color and horror delineating the destruction of Beirut, now again, as always, horrifically relevant; Anne Waldman read a moving letter that Adnan once sent her. (I read my text about Adnan from the book, too.) There was also a nighttime reading organized by Giorno Poetry Systems and *Mousse* on the illuminated lawn of the glass house at the edge of the Giardini. Here Angharad Williams magnetically offered poems in Welsh then burned the place down with her manic recitation of family gatherings burnished and blazoned by narcotics.

Elsewhere, silence was centered, articulated, made material. A dark forest of sentinel-like sister figures—an assembly of columns, daimons, minor deities—created by Chiara Camoni out of rough terracotta, glazed stoneware, ash and soil from certain mountains, fresh and dried and plastic flowers, and fake hair, rose quietly from the ground of the Italian Pavilion, as if in some dark, protected glen. The winds they were shielded from were to be found in the Finnish Pavilion, where Jenna Sutela's Aeolian Suite of sculptures and wind instruments blew (the Aeolian mode being the natural minor musical key) cloaked in freaky, puppet-like wigs (so much fake hair this year, everywhere). These rhymes of form and meaning, speaker and receiver, a kind of call-and-response structure, seemed to propagate the longer I was in the city. In Lydia Ourahmane's precise exhibition at the Nicoletta Fiorucci Foundation, for example, which included an antique mold of a cherub, the negative space of the cast placed expertly, movingly, inside a wall of the palazzo. Her absent angel seemed to then appear, fully formed, in the Nordic Pavilion, in Benjamin Orlow's hauntingly abject busts of angels and men alike. His works in clay and bronze were at once delicate of visage—that angelic face!—and mountainous of material. Adnan's invocations of angels echoed through my brain: "Through the long night of the species we go on, somehow blindly, and we give a name to our need for a breakthrough: we call it the Angel, or call it Art, or call it the Mountain."⁵

We do. We call it all these things but sometimes that need for a breakthrough requires not language, but silence. In Venice, we found it. On our last morning there, before the demo to come, which would flood Venice's narrow streets with bodies in protest against Gaza's annihilation, and a world system devoted to death, not life, a friend and I sat quietly, exhausted, inside the Qatar Pavilion, an actual pavilion on a plot of land secured for a €50 million donation to the city of Venice, waiting for a musical performance that would not begin due, in part, to the strike in solidarity with Palestine. Many of the Arab pavilions had not closed, it was said, because of the repercussions they could face from their regimes. Some European pavilions had closed, but not nearly all. Qatar's stance seemed undetermined. Who could afford to shut down a pavilion and who could not, who chose to and who did not, was another score passed over in silence. Someone suggested to Tarek Atoui that the musicians still play that day as a manifestation of resistance, energizing instead of mourning. Mourning takes all forms, though. We refuse the forms of life available to us, yes, but what do we accept? Sitting there, as people discussed what to do about the

concert, I again recalled Kanwar's peacocks, scaling the walls of his cemetery, scaling the walls of my academy, watching over the dead and the living, a dazzlingly ludic work of suffering and struggle that the artist dedicated to "the diamond light of darkness / of visible fear and forgotten pain / To flashes of your lightening rage." The rain had gone but the lightning hadn't.

This is part of a series of responses to the 61st Venice Biennale by e-flux Criticism. Further reviews, as well as appraisals of its satellite projects, will appear in the coming days and weeks.

Notes

- 1 Hannah Black, "Artist Profile," interview by Jesse Darling, Rhizome, February 17, 2015, <https://rhizome.org/editorial/2015/feb/17/artist-profile-hannah-black>.
- 2 See John Douglas Millar, "Ben Lerner's *Transcription*," *e-flux Criticism*, April 17, 2026, <https://www.e-flux.com/criticism/6782414/ben-lerner-s-transcription>.
- 3 Pope Leo XIV, "Encounter with the World of Cinema," address at the Vatican, November 15, 2025, <https://www.vatican.va/content/leo-xiv/en/speeches/2025/november/documents/20251115-mondo-del-cinema.html>.
- 4 Bishop Rob Hirschfeld, "Reflection from the Renee Good Vigil," Concord, New Hampshire, January 9, 2026, <https://www.nhepiscopal.org/blog/2026/1/11/bishop-robs-reflection-from-the-renee-good-vigil-in-concord-nh-january-9-2026>.
- 5 Etel Adnan, *Journey to Mount Tamalpais: An Essay* (Sausalito: Post-Apollo Press, 1986).

Category

Music, Nationalism

Quinn Latimer is a writer based in Basel and Athens.

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