

# The People's Biennale is the best for a decade

Every two years the art world gathers in Venice to see and be seen. This time it's not only the established who get a look-in, says an enthralled **Rachel Campbell-Johnston**

The outsider is coming in. That's the main message of the Venice Biennale this year. And it matters. This brooding, sprawling of a cultural brain is more than just a brain-adding exercise. It is the most important trend-setting contemporary art world event. Amid the mad mêlée that takes over the supremely beautiful city of Venice — occupying not just the Giardini, with its purpose-built national pavilions and the neighbouring warehouses of the city's erstwhile arsenal, but every available palazzo and canal-side cranny — artistic tastes are established, fashions are set and the future explored.

But it can be pretty daunting to all but the most practised insider. It's so big. This year, ten new participants have been added to the list of contributing nations, among them Ivory Coast and the Republic of Kosovo, the Kingdom of Bahrain and the Holy See. The sheer range of the art works on show is — as always — vast. The visitor will find everyone from the loftiest pillar of the establishment to the zaniest bit-part player. He can enjoy a banquet from a major Anthony Caro retrospective in the august Museo Correr to a haircut in the tree tops from a highly intellectualised re-creation of a 1966 exhibition at the Kunsthalte Bern to a soothing musical interlude by the orchestra on board an Icelandic boat. But this biennale feels different. Massimiliano Gioni, the curator of this 55th edition, has expertly orchestrated an event that has all too frequently in the past felt like a lofty aloof cultural establishment. Now it flows wide its doors and embraces all comers. *The Encyclopaedic Palace is the*

chosen title for his international exhibition — the biennale's main flagship show, held in the Arsenal. It is taken from a work by self-taught Italian-American artist, Marino Auriti (1891-1980), who spent years brooding upon the construction of a museum that would house all the world's knowledge. An architectural model of his planned (but never achieved) 700m-tall Tower of Babel opens the Arsenal exhibition. What follows is a little akin to a contemporary version of a cabinet of curiosities. The heterogeneous assortment of works that Gioni hangs together speak of our fundamental human desire — a yearning that verges, not least in our world of ever more

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expansive information sources, upon a mad obsession — to see and to know and to discover everything. The display is democratic in tone. In both the central pavilion in the Giardini (which begins with a display of Carl Jung's colourful manuscript for his *Red Book*) and the sprawling spaces of the Arsenal, works by obscure or anonymous makers, by people who have never claimed to be making art, are hung alongside pieces (some specially commissioned) by some of our most celebrated contemporaries, as well as established historical names. Amid a labyrinth of sculptures, films and photographs, performances and installations — but markedly few paintings — you can find the dusty

ex-votos (an offering to a saint or divinity) that usually hang in Italian churches, and the divinations of the notorious occultist Aleister Crowley. There are pictures done by prisoners or blind people depicting a world they will never see, and works by such art world celebrities as Friedrich Schlegel and Walter de Maria, Cindy Sherman or Richard Serra, Miroslaw Balka and Hans Bellmer. The line between professional and amateur, outsider and insider, is blurred. The hang adopts the basic pattern of placing a large object in the middle of a space while smaller, related images unspool all around it, making it both inviting and evocative at the same time. Are you inside the circle or outside it? The sense of perspective constantly shifts. But fundamentally the spectator feels himself included. There's no need to panic to resort, as so often in the past, to impossibly obscure wall texts. Wonder and imagination alone seem enough. The onlooker becomes a participant in the experience.

And it is this sense of inclusiveness that makes the latest biennale important. It can't be a coincidence that those champions of outsider art, the Museum of Everything, have chosen this year to do their first Venice show. Art should no longer be limited to the lofty domain of the cultural establishment — not least in an era when sometimes it seems as if the world itself is becoming increasingly like an image. Art is about something made not just by art history books or financial markets, but by an inner imagination which is as magical and mysterious as it is amazing and impossible to describe. What could be more complicated? What could be more basic? This year's biennale is the best for at least a decade. **The Venice Biennale lasts until Nov 24. labiennale.org**



Above: Manet's Olympia — out of France for the first time — alongside the work that inspired it, Titian's Venus of Urbino. Below left: One of Ai Weiwei's series of miniature models SACRED. Below right: The yacht is Roman Abramovich's. The artist is Jeremy Deller in his show English Magic. Bottom: the award-winning Lynette Yiadom-Boakye



**SACRED** by Ai Weiwei at the Zucca Project Space, Giudecca and Church of St Antonio, Castello. Despite not being able to attend in person, the Chinese dissident has a greater representation than probably any other artist. His work can be seen in three sites, most hauntingly in SACRED, an installation in the church of St Antonio. Visitors are invited to peek into a series of large iron boxes. Inside are scenes from the artist's detention. Spy on a miniature Ai Weiwei as he sleeps or eats or sits on the latratory, always in the same cramped surroundings, always in the presence of his guards. The hyperreal detail and the increasingly nightmarish sense of surveillance are unnerving.

**Belgium Pavilion in the Giardini** The Nobel Prize-winning South African novelist J. M. Coetzee has curated the Belgium Pavilion after the artist Bertine de Bruyckere worked with him on a book. The result is impressive. A vast tree at first appears to have been felled, breaking through the walls. The longer you look, though, the more animated it appears, the more fantastical the visions and fantasies that rise up. De Bruyckere works in wax to create forms possessed of an almost mystical metaphorical force.

**Manet: Return to Venice at the Doge's Palace** In a spectacular show that focuses on the part the Italian Old Masters played in forging the style of the great French modernist, Manet's impudently insouciant Olympia travels outside France for the first time to lounge alongside the luxuriously sensuous Venus of Urbino by Titian that inspired it. Two of the greatest beauties of our cultural history meet in an artistic encounter you can't afford to miss.

## Ten top sights at the Biennale



**English Magic** by Jeremy Deller at the British Pavilion in the Giardini The Turner Prize-winning Jeremy Deller offers a crash course in British cultural history in a show that incorporates anything from paleolithic axe heads, through the Arts and Crafts movement to David Bowie's Ziggy Stardust tour. And you can stop in the middle for a cuppa. You will need it if you are going to come to contemplative terms with this rambling installation.

**Welcome to Iraq at Sede Ca' Dandolo, San Toma** At the 2011 biennale, Iraq introduced itself through artists of the diaspora. But here it invites visitors to engage with art works being made in the country. Don't miss the film made by Jamal Penjwani who, filming the desperate plight of alcohol smugglers, steers clear of melodrama but still moves viewers to tears.

## artsvsvisual art

**The Starry Messenger** by Bedwyr Williams at the Ludoteca Santa Maria Ausiliatrice The Welsh representative at this year's biennale plunges us into the darkness of that world-changing moment in which Galileo first looked through a telescope. As you stretch out blindly into the black you fumble — quite literally — for a sense of your place in this Universe as the ambient birdsong of a suburban garden sings gently.

**Future Generation Art Prize at the Pinchuk Art Centre, Palazzo Contarini Polignac, Dorsoduro** Four thousand contenders from all over the world were narrowed down to the 20 who participate in a show that varies from the Chinese Xing Yan's Sweet Movie, an embarrassingly upfront pornographic performance, to the poetic installation of the Brazilian André Komatsu, whose skyscrapers of stacked papers, all printed with symbols of temporal power, are gently waded by the winds from encircling fans. But the winner of the prize is this year's Turner Prize-shortlisted Lynette Yiadom-Boakye, below left.

**Palazzo Peckham at Castello 270** The brainchild of the perennially

enthusiastic art dealer Hannah Barry, this space — designed by artists, provides a laid-back forum in which to gather, swap ideas, drink espresso and dangle bare toes off the jetty at the back or slump on the lurid furnishings.

**Maria Lassnig and Marisa Merz** Hunt out the works of the two golden lionesses in the Arsenal. The biennale's most prestigious prize — The Golden Lion for lifetime achievement — is this year shared by two women whose tenaciously inquisitive, restlessly determined explorations of the female body and the domestic sphere to which it has so often been confined have, over the past 50 years, opened up new possibilities for thousands of female followers.

**The Holy See, Arsenal** Play God in the pavilion of the Holy See, participating in the biennale for the first time. An immersive video installation takes the first chapter of Genesis as its focus. Stretch out a hand, like the divinity in Michelangelo's famous Sistine fresco, and touch one of the screens to bring the animal and vegetable world to new life. It's an evocative experience.

**Rachel Campbell-Johnston**

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